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Prologue

Prologue

The wind rushed soundlessly over the clifftop, the salty air wet on the breeze. Down below, waves crashed against the beach that sloped away from the cliffs, the waves roaring in a never-ending rush and recession. The sun beat down on the sandy terrain, heating it to an uncomfortable temperature.

On this rather desolate landscape, moved a flash of burnished red and orange fur belonging to a cat. His green eyes were bright and he moved with the suppleness of a young cat. His fur stuck up in odd angles, a result of living in such a salty air, and a freshly caught rabbit hung from his mouth.

He approached the edge of the cliff, unperturbed by the long drop and treacherous trail as he made his way down a thin, eroding sandy trail, navigating it with practiced ease. He paused on the trail a few tail-lengths above the beach where the waves clawed hungrily not more than twenty tail-lengths away.

The red-orange tom ducked into a small rock cave hollowed out in the side of the cliff. It was a rather large den, enough for four grown cats to stand in comfortably at once. It was hollowed out of the earth, so the ground and walls were soft, but almost as hard as rocks so they didn't have to worry about erosion.

The tom stepped into the cave, the front half illuminated from the light outside, the back half framed in shadows. His eyes brightened even more then before when they fell upon a cat laying on her side in the moss-grass nest in the very back of the den.

"Rainstone," he purred happily, feeling affection and tenderness wash over his already joyful heart. There was nothing he loved more than seeing his beloved safe and sound in the cave. Rainstone was small with a round head, sharply pricked ears, and large, round paws that looked too big in comparison to the rest of her size.

"Needlepine," Rainstone answered with a content sigh. Her dark gray fur was silky smooth, for some reason it wasn't affected by the salty air like his was, and the dark blue tints on her fur had grown stronger around her paws since they had finished their travelling at this spot.

"Were you okay while I was gone?" Needlepine asked, setting down the prey. He was always nervous about leaving his mate alone, especially now.

"Yes, Scorch is fine too," Rainstone purred, eyeing the prey hungrily.

Needlepine felt a surge of excited delight at Scorch's name, the little kitten was only a few days old, but already he knew she was perfect. He gave the prey to Rainstone and peered into the curve of her belly where one, tiny kitten slept.

Scorch was small; he could tell she had the same body as Rainstone, the characteristics of the mountain cats Rainstone had travelled from. But her fur was red-orange like his, except it was a tone darker, as if his fur colors had been put in shadows. The kitten's right ear, paw, and left eye were patched black, giving an even greater shadowed effect. And when Scorch had opened her eyes that morning, they'd been green like his, but so dark they were almost black. Like how Rainstone's eyes were blue, but almost black.

But they were both perfect to Needlepine, and he couldn't suppress his happiness and thankfulness that Rainstone had come into his life. But like always, as he thought about when he met Rainstone, he thought of his Clan, ShadowClan.

He and Rainstone had left the Clans during a revolution started by rogues and Clan-cats. He didn't know how the battle had turned out, but he knew that the fight he had been a part of had been a complete defeat. He would be dead if Rainstone hadn't dragged him off the battlefield.

But that was in the past, he believed the Clans would be alright. Right now, all he had to worry about was protecting his mate and

kit and providing food for them all. An easy thing to do when there was only the two of them to eat fresh-kill.

Needlepine shared the rabbit he'd caught with Rainstone, looking at her with glimmering eyes over his meal. Rainstone looked so much different from when he'd first met her. She'd always been running places, doing things, always busy as if she was trying to distract herself while anxiety and worry showed black in her eyes.

But now, she had an air of calm and enjoyment as if she was finally living life and enjoying every bit of it. Her eyes were sparkly blue and although she was never busy, she wasn't idle and wandering. She loved to sit outside their den and stare out into the ocean for a long time, especially at sunset when the sun sank behind the waters.

Needlepine purred lightly, feeling contentment settle down on his shoulders like a soft blanket. Nowhere to go, no threats, not much to do, a family he loved, a home where he felt safe. He had everything he could have hoped for, and so did Rainstone.

But he didn't notice as he settled down to sleep with Rainstone, the wide, wondering stare given by his kit. A dark eyed stare that saw things he couldn't, and saw it all.

Chapter 1: Mirages

Chapter 1: Mirages

Scorch laughed gaily as she chased after the black cat in front of her. Her dark green eyes sparkling in mischief as she swatted at the tail in front of her face, never catching or even managing to touch to fluffy black tail.

"Scorch! What are you doing?" a call made Scorch halt in her tracks, her tiny red and black paws digging into the hot sand at the sudden stop as she looked over her shoulder at her mother who watched her curiously from near the ocean.

"I was playing with the cat," Scorch mewed, blinking and noticing how the colors around her got more vivid as she stopped looking at the black cat. *Weird.*

"What cat?" Rainstone asked, tilting her head to the side, puzzled.

"That one," Scorch mewed, looking back to where the cat had been, but frowning when all she saw was the sandy beach and roaring waves. "I guess he went home," she frowned and shrugged her tiny shoulders, bounding back to her mother and touching noses with her.

"I didn't see a cat, what did he look like?" Rainstone questioned; dark blue eyes wide and gentle.

Scorch frowned, trying to think about him. She hadn't gotten a good look at him; she'd just noticed a cat running along the shore as she played with the waves and had chased after him for fun. He had black fur and dark eyes and had never once turned to look at her as she tried catching his tail.

"He was black and tall, taller than even dad, and he had a long fluffy tail and dark eyes, I think they were amber," Scorch described, looking up at her mother's intrigued expression as she

waved her tail.

"If he comes over again, we'll invite him for a meal," Rainstone purred lightly as Scorch finished. But the kit noticed that Rainstone's dark blue eyes were wary. She knew her mother was wary of strangers, no matter how hard she tried to get used to the cats that passed by every once in a while. But she knew her mother would always feel most comfortable all alone or with her small family.

Scorch sighed and squinted as she looked up at the sky that was wreathed in clouds. She was different from her mother; she could never get enough of their visitors and loved hearing stories of far away. Her parents were happy staying where they were, but she wanted to travel and learn more and more.

However, at only three moons of age, she couldn't even climb to the top of the cliff, so she had to content herself with this stretch of sandy beach and unending water. She looked out at the water now, it was blue-green today and the waves were lazy as they curled white and rolled onto shore, washing over the wet sand again and again.

She laughed and bounded onto the wet sand where the water rolled over her paws, wet and warm and tickling. She could feel her paws sink down in the sand as wave after wave rolled by, pushing and pulling sand over her toes.

"Scorch! Be careful!" her mother warned. Scorch nodded to show she'd heard, she'd once gotten swept out in the water with the waves, and her mother had to swim to rescue her. Rainstone had been terrified, but Scorch had found it fun as the waves had rolled them back to shore over the water.

But she didn't go deeper in the water then half-way up her short legs anymore. The salt water had stung her eyes and nose and made her taste nothing but salt for days. That hadn't been so enjoyable. She looked out at the ocean, she could see far-off waves with white caps and where the water merged with the blue sky.

This is the edge of the world, but what's in the rest of the world? The

thoughts crossed her mind once more and she flicked her black paw to touch her black ear, reminding herself that she would one day travel far from here, when her legs were just a bit longer.

Scorch breathed out and closed her eyes, feeling the rush of the ocean around her paws, the pulling feeling at her belly, and the emerged sun hot on her back. When she opened her eyes, a little wider than usual, the colors were muted, like when she'd been chasing the black cat and at other times when she saw strangers.

Moving her head stiffly, and without willing it to turn, she saw two cats batting with each other up along the shore, just past where Rainstone was sitting. They moved in slow movements, with no transition from one move to another, like with the black cat. The sounds of playful hisses and growls reached her ears, but they seemed swept along with the wind, not coming from that direction but being heard by her alone.

Scorch's dark eyes widened even more as the two playing cats bumped into Rainstone. Or, more exactly, didn't bump into, but moved right through her mother as if she weren't there. Scorch's mouth dropped and she blinked, the rush of the world running away from her until everything felt normal and the colors were vivid once more.

Rainstone was watching her curiously again and Scorch realized she was shaking. The kit looked down at her paws, one red and one black, bubbling white water washing over them and leaving sand in her fur along with the taste of salt.

What was that? She was shivering, the cats had been there, she had heard them and seen them, they'd seemed so real, but apparently they weren't, or any of the other cats she'd seen when she felt like that. She may be young but she wasn't stupid. Although she'd seen things like that for as long as she could remember, cats didn't pass through other cats.

So what is it that I'm seeing? And for the first time ever, she felt frightened about not knowing something.

...

"Mom, do you ever see things that aren't really there?" Scorch asked later that evening after her father had come home from hunting and they were eating their evening meal with the red light of the setting sun lighting up the entire den as it sank into the water.

Rainstone glanced at her, her dark blue eyes glinting as if she was thinking of something, but then she shook her head. "No, I don't," her mother mewed in finality, with a sharp edge that warned at a lie.

Needlepine glanced at his mate worriedly, then at his confused kit. He pulled Scorch close with one of his large orange paws, pressing her to his chest and nuzzling her head. "I sometimes here from passing loners that when it's really sunny, on the sandy beaches, there can sometimes be mirages," Needlepine mewed.

Mirages? Scorch felt a rush of relief that what she was seeing wasn't anything odd. She refused to call to mind that sometimes she'd seen cats that suddenly disappeared even when it was cloudy. "So, if you see something that isn't really there, then it's not strange?" Scorch pressed persistently.

Needlepine gave a dry cough, "Well, a mirage is surely strange, why do you keep asking Scorch? Did you see a mirage?" Needlepine leaned down to look at her with his laughing, sparkling green eyes.

Scorch giggled and batted at her father's nose, wishing again that she had his bright eyes. But no, her eyes were dark, so dark you could hardly tell they're green, they were practically black and she didn't like it. Then she felt a rush of guilt, her mother's eyes were like that too.

They finished their meal, hardly noticing that Needlepine's question had gone unanswered. Then, as the sun disappeared and the shadows grew thicker as stars started appearing, they settled down for sleep.

Scorch couldn't sleep though, she was still thinking. What were those cats she'd seen before? Were they mirages? Or were they real and her eyes had just tricked her? It was amazingly frightened for Scorch to not know what was real and what wasn't.

If those cats weren't real, why could I hear them? Was it Rainstone sitting there that was the mirage? Or is this whole world a dream and I'll wake up any moment, those cats that I've been seeing reality intruding on my sleep?

Scorch frowned, touching Rainstone and feeling the silky fur beneath her paw and her warm breath tickling her whiskers. It seemed real, more real than those cats. But if she saw so many of them, why shouldn't they be real?

They are just mirages, she insisted to herself. But she had to see, had to know for herself. Moving carefully, as to not disturb her sleeping mother and father, she untangled herself from their embrace and padded on her toes to the entrance of the den, feeling tingly as she peered out the den, she'd never been outside at night.

She carefully placed her paws on the shadowed trail that led down to the beach, the sand muffling her clumsy stumbles as she looked around the beach in the night. The sky was black with thousands of twinkling lights and shadowed silver danced on the waves, but the source was hidden from sight, probably by the tall cliffs that blocked off half the sky from sight.

Okay, she told herself, closing her eyes and concentrating on feeling like she usually did before she saw any of those cats. The sand was oddly and comfortably cool between her toes and she rocked back in forth as the shadows swept over her like the waves, her mind sinking down under the black waves in her head.

Then she jerked open her eyes and stared open-mouthed as cats, more then she had ever seen before in her life, of all shapes and colors doing all sorts of things. But the light had dimmed just like before and the cats moved from one position to the next without transitional movement.

Then the sounds, constant babbling and rambling and hisses and growls and cries pressing down on her ears, but when she covered them, nothing changed. She realized the noise was going directly into her head, she heard it, but she wasn't listening.

W-What's wrong with me?! She desperately needed an answer as she

spun around between the cats. She could feel them, when she brushed by them, but none ever noticed her. *I know that no other cat sees these things, so what's wrong with me? Am I dead and I'm just a living ghost seeing other ghosts?!* She was panicking as she raced through them wildly, wondering where the end to this was.

"Scorch," a calm, commanding, and raspy voice halted her. It wasn't speaking into her head, she heard it with her ears and the rest of the babbles and cats disappeared and she was left alone on the dark beach. Well, not completely alone.

She turned to the speaker, her eyes widening and she trembled as she faced a tall black she-cat with amber eyes. The cat had unusually large paws and spoke with the same accent that she'd half-acquired from her mother, a low lilt that was almost a slur on some words.

"W-who are you?" Scorch demanded, feigning bravery as she faced the much larger cat.

"My name is Song, I am a friend of your mother," the black cat mewed.

"She's never mentioned you before," Scorch mewed suspiciously, not that her mother had mentioned anything of her past, and neither had her father.

"No, she hasn't, and if you asked her, she wouldn't tell you," Song mewed quietly, stepping closer and bending her head so she was eye-level with the kit.

"But, Scorch, you have a very special gift that makes you very different from Rainstone," Song continued.

"What is it?" Scorch asked as her curiosity overran her wariness.

"I cannot tell you that, you must learn it for yourself and how to control it, but I will not leave you alone to deal with it. I can tell you that your life will change in ways you cannot foresee and that you will have to travel far from here," Song mewed.

"When?" Scorch asked, almost excited at the prospect of travelling

far away.

"Not now, but soon," Song mewed with warning patience.

"Will mom and dad come too?" Scorch asked, suddenly afraid as she sensed the answer.

Song sighed, "It will be long journey, and one that you must make on your own. Look at your parents, they've finally found the peace they longed for, they deserve to stay here. And it will be you who can make the change in their legacy, not them and no cat else," Song mewed, starting to turn transparent and fade.

"Wait!" Scorch cried, "I don't understand!" she wailed, more confused than ever. But Song was gone, the strange cats were gone, huddling down on the cold sand, Scorch had decided there was no end to how confused and frightened you could feel in one day.

...

"Are you okay, Scorch?" Rainstone asked her next morning as the dark red and black kitten picked at her meal unhappily.

"No..." Scorch mumbled her answer, feeling her ears burn as she lied. She was definitely not okay, and she had decided that either the beach was driving her crazy, or she really was not completely equal with reality. *So how do I live if I'm not real?*

The frustrated questions just kept coming. Scorch grumbled to herself as she scraped at the floor of the den with her tiny claws. "Did dad already go out to hunt again?" Scorch asked, noticing the absence of her bright orange and red father.

"Yes... he told me when he hunted breakfast that he found a strange scent, so he was going to investigate it," Rainstone mewed with a hint of worry.

"But what if it's something dangerous?" Scorch shivered in slight fear, one cat all alone was an even more terrifying thought to her then the idea that she may not be completely sane. That was truly her greatest fear.

"Needlepine is a very strong cat, he is smart as well, he shall be just fine," Rainstone mewed comfortingly. Although, Scorch sensed the doubt Rainstone possessed along with the blank fear she felt for her mate, along with her frustration that she couldn't be there with her mate.

That was another thing; Scorch could often correctly sense what a cat was truly feeling, she just could feel the emotion. It was often why she was so willing to trust loners, because she could sense no malice or evil intentions from them.

"I'm bored," Scorch whined, looking out the den. The usually sunny sky was thickly covered with clouds and the wind was brisk and caused her to shiver, keeping her inside the den. The waves of the ocean were unusually high, being driven in by the harsh wind. And for the first time in a long time, Scorch felt nervous as she looked at the stormy gray water capped with swirling dull white.

"Why don't I tell you a story?" Rainstone suggested, pulling her away from the entrance and back to their comfortable nest.

"Fine," Scorch sighed, though she was secretly excited, she loved all stories.

"Okay... how about a story about where I'm from?" Rainstone mewed, dark blue eyes growing misty with memory.

"Yeah!" Scorch cheered, she'd never heard much about where her mother was from, only that she'd lived in giant stone hills called mountains. And she knew absolutely nothing about her mother's past.

"Alright," Rainstone laughed lightly, pulling her close. "I used to live in a big group of cats in a green valley surrounded by mountains. It was very beautiful, very green and the clearest water formed a stream, it was so clear you could see every pebble in the stream," Rainstone described.

"Not like the ocean?" Scorch asked, thinking about their water pool on the beach where collected rainwater pooled in a sandstone basin, safe for drinking. The ocean water was dark, but the drinking

water was very clear.

"Nothing like the ocean, it was quiet and gentle, just a little babble, not like the roar here," Rainstone explained. Scorch pricked her ears as she listened to the constant and rather loud crash of waves. She'd never experienced quiet water before.

"What were the cats like that you lived with?" Scorch asked eagerly, wondering how many cats there had been and how they'd lived. She though back to the numerous cats she'd seen last night, *surely there can't be more cats in the world then that!*

"There were many cats, some cats hunted, while others guarded our home, and there were two leaders, one in charge of each duty and the mentoring of young cats," Rainstone hesitated and Scorch frowned as she felt deep reluctance and dry anger in her mother. But most confusing was deep, forlorn longing.

"Were they nice cats?" Scorch asked hesitantly.

Rainstone shrugged, looking away. "Some were nice, some weren't, it just depended," bitter sadness was heavy on the words and Scorch felt subdued, forgetting her troubles as she watched her unhappy mother.

"Why don't we talk about the cats your father is from?" Rainstone suddenly mewed, forcing brightness that Scorch happily accepted.

"Okay! Where's daddy from?" she asked, putting her paws on Rainstone's outstretched leg.

"He's from another group of cats, one of four, more cats then I had ever seen before! They are called Clans; ThunderClan, WindClan, RiverClan, and ShadowClan, Needlepine was from ShadowClan. They are cats that hunt by night and practice stealth in all things."

Rainstone went on to explain how she'd been washed into Clan territory by a flooded stream and how she'd met Needlepine at a gathering of all four Clans, then got to know him better while the two spied on some cats that were plotting to destroy the Clans. Scorch's mother continued with her and Needlepine's many

adventures and endeavors to help the Clans from the intrinsic plot against them.

"But how did the battle turn out?" Scorch asked impatiently when Rainstone had finished.

Rainstone tilted her head to the side, "I don't know, but I'm sure the Clans won in the end, they had the numbers to do it," her mother shrugged adamantly, but now Scorch was tingling with curiosity.

"Well, one day, I'll go visit the Clans and see if they won for myself!" she announced.

Rainstone purred, and patted her head. "When you're a bit bigger, I'm sure you can make a quick visit to the Clans, it's probably a few days journey if you head straight there," Rainstone mewed wistfully. "Actually... I'd like to know how a friend is doing as well..."

"Would you come with me?" Scorch asked excitedly, but not hopefully as she remembered what song had said.

Her mother shook her head, "No, I'm content enough here, but I'll wait for you here if you go," Rainstone looked at her kindly.

"Okay," Scorch sighed in resignation, she knew her mother had absolutely no will to leave here ever again. She could sense it.

"Hey, you two! Are you alright?" Scorch looked over her shoulder to see her father heading into the den, fur sticking up as odd angles like her own fur did in the salty air.

"Dad! You're back!" Scorch cried, hurtling herself at her father's back and pawing her way up to lay belly-down on his warm back.

Needlepine laughed at his daughter and looked at his mate. "So, what was it?" Rainstone asked.

Needlepine blew out a long breath, "It was a fox, I'll avoid that area until its moved past, I don't think it'll settle down around here though, not much shelter, and foxes need shelter," Needlepine mewed from below her.

"What's a fox?" Scorch asked curiously.

"They are big, red, beasts," Needlepine growled playfully.

"Like you?" Scorch giggled.

"What? I'm nothing like a fox!" Needlepine yelped in mock offence. Scorch laughed at her father's silly antics as he started to whine like a kit.

For the moment, she was just a kit playing with her parents again, laughing in blissful ignorance. Her mirages that appeared only for her were at the back of her mind along with Song's words. But they were still there, nonetheless.

Chapter 2: Past Memories

Chapter 2: Past Memories

"Look! Look! Over here! Look at all this water!" Scorch watched distractedly as one of her mirages, an older cat and a younger cat, seemingly seeing the ocean for the first time, squealed and jumped in the shallow water along the shore.

She blinked, letting the mirage fall away as she felt a sick pit in her stomach. A moon had passed since she'd realized her mirages weren't real. No answers had turned up, but more questions had aroused. What in the world was she seeing?! That was still the biggest one.

For a while, she'd tried seeing if she just saw what she wished, but when she wished to see anything specifically, such as a mother and her kits, she would get something totally different. What's more, every cat seemed to be doing something in particular, an action or a purpose that she didn't know.

If they were figments of her imaginations, shouldn't she at least know what they were doing? But one question led to another, and she wondered why she only saw them when she focused on the sensation of the world. When the rush of the ocean swept her away or the sensation of the sunlight drowned her out, that was when she saw it.

But she had given up on trying figuring it out by herself, and she kept wishing to see this, 'Song,' cat again and demand some answers. She looked over the shore now for the black cat, but only saw the gray sky along with the gray waves, rain being promised by the breeze that was more wet-laden than usual.

She was alone on the shore with her mother sleeping in the den after staring up at the night sky for hours last night. And her father had gone hunting again before the storm hit. So, for the moment, she was alone as she stared around without a thought or motive in

her head.

Can't something interesting happen?! I want to do something! I need something to do outside of survival! A greater purpose! But she couldn't think of anything, what was there outside of survival?

That was all her parents thought about, the next meal and a safe home. Weren't they interested in anything past their whiskers? She scraped a paw in the sand as she listened to the cry of seagulls overhead. This place was full of life, constantly changing and moving, so why did she feel stuck between the sky and earth?

She looked around and her eyes strayed to the clifftops and the thin, strangely trail that her father took to get to the top. I've always wanted to go up there... I'm sure it's not as dangerous as mom and dad say it is. With guilty excitement, she scampered to the trail, climbing to the den and then continuing on where she usually stopped.

She panted as she struggled up the sand that slid her backward with every step until she wondered if she was even advancing. Finally her front black paw hit the top hard ground and she pulled herself up, rolling on her back to catch her breath as she stared up at the spinning gray sky.

Once recovered, she jumped to her paws and looked out over the beach that was now far below her with the den a small bump in the steep cliffs. Then her eyes trailed and she looked at the ocean, churning gray water stretched on for as far as she could see, a repeating pattern that changed slightly with every roll of the waves.

"Wow..." she breathed; it seemed so much more magnificent when it was below her. Tearing her gaze away, she turned her head away from the sharp wind of the ocean to see where she was. The ground was sandy, but had a firm feeling she wasn't used to, and the pale color gradually turned to brown stumped with green as it stretched away from the clifftop.

Out in the furthest distance was a dark haze, as if shadows sat there thick and rich. A few stunted rocks sat around, but the ground was relatively bare and lonesome. It didn't feel as lively as she'd thought

it would, was the world all so bare and desolate?

She shivered in the wind as the first few drops of rain fell onto her head. The cold, the rain, the loneliness... The world felt scary and remorseful up here. She didn't even try but before she knew it there were mirages appearing in front of her again. But this time, they weren't happy one's going about menial tasks.

These cats were fighting, crying, bleeding, and dying. She saw more than one mirage fall dead at the claws of another. Cats screaming their misery as the world fell apart in their tiny space. The miserable sadness and bitter outrage pressed on her shocked young mind and she scrunched her eyes closed as she willed it all to end.

"You must learn to control your power," a familiar ancient voice sounded against her ears while the others dissipated in her mind.

Scorch dared open her eyes again and saw Song standing there. She was still shaking as she saw in her mind over and over cats lose their lives and others wail over their death. That was true loneliness, not being alone, but not having anything to go back to.

She realized she was shaking and her lips were quivering as if she were about to cry. No, the salty tears were already falling and the sob racked in her chest and escaped her tiny mouth. She raced to Song and felt a surge of relief that she could press her face in Song's stiff black fur.

"I can't do this anymore; can't you take this all away? I just want to live like a normal cat! Just want to travel and see things, real things! I don't need these mirages!" she cried, not wanting to ever be haunted by another illusion again.

"Dear Scorch," Song sighed, resting her muzzle on her head. "Your gift is not something to be afraid of, learn to control it," Song told her once again.

"How can I control something I don't understand?!" Scorch protested in miserable frustration.

"Do you not know what you are seeing?" Song asked gently, it

sounded rhetorical.

Scorch shook her head quickly, making her ears flop as she raised her face to look at Song. "What am I seeing?" she asked.

"You are merely seeing past memories," Song explained, not very helpfully.

Scorch frowned, "Like memories of other cats? Because they sure aren't my memories!"

"No... just past memories," Song mewed, starting to fade again.

"Wait!" Scorch mewed frantically, "Memories of who?! And how do I control it?!" but Song was gone and she was alone again, shivering as the rain fell down harder and harder.

"Your journey is about to begin," Song's voice whispered in her ear once more and then fell silent. Scorch huffed unhappily, but she wasn't going to complain out loud. I mean, how many other cats are given help from cats that just appear and disappear? She should just be thankful she was given help at all!

...

"Scorch, where were you? I didn't see you on the beach when it started to rain," Rainstone greeted her as the four moon old kit trudge into the den. *Wait, trudge? Since when did I trudge?* Scorch snapped quickly at herself before forcing herself to look at this more optimistically.

"Oh, I just climbed to the top of the cliff," Scorch mewed, shaking her wet pelt.

"Aren't you not supposed to go up there yet?" Rainstone questioned her.

"You said that when I was three moons old, now I'm four," Scorch defended herself simply. Besides, she sensed that her mother wasn't really angry or distressed, but just slightly annoyed. And her annoyance was fed by the fact that Needlepine hadn't come back yet even as the rain came down harder, pattering and running down

the sloped sides of the den.

"Fine, but make sure you tell me next time. You don't know how to fight yet," Rainstone mewed, stretching before sitting up.

"When can I learn to fight and hunt?!" She asked excitedly, already imagining how great she was going to be at it.

"When you are five moons old, that's how old kits had to be where I'm from, but if you'd like, I can start teaching you about herbs," Rainstone mewed, pulling her away from the den entrance and licking her fur dry.

"Why do I need to know about that?" Scorch asked, glancing at the small pile of herbs that her mother kept in stash in a clinch in the den wall.

"Because knowledge of herbs can save your life, and the lives of others," Rainstone explained.

Scorch frowned and nodded, she didn't know anything about herbs; she didn't even know why they had them or how they could save lives. But she was willing to learn. Although, she sensed a deep current of dislike in her mother as she looked at the herbs. Her mother knew about them, was grateful she knew about them, but disliked them nonetheless.

"Okay, I can't go outside today anyways," Scorch mewed, glancing forlornly at the silver curtain of rain, wishing she could go play in the hot sand until her paws burned and the sun went down.

Rainstone nodded and pulled out the herbs they had, explaining to her what it was called, where it grew, letting her taste it to get a sharp sense for it, and telling her how it was used and what its effects were. Scorch found it a lot more interesting then she'd thought it'd be.

Wow, herbs to heal wounds! This is really important, this truly can save lives! Scorch spent all her mental energy to learning the herbs that day, her sharp memory and senses memorizing all the herbs they had in store.

"Well, that's enough for now, good job Scorch," Rainstone purred, touching noses with her as she put away the herbs.

"How many more herbs are there outside?!" Scorch asked, bouncing around.

"Oh, many more, these are just the most common cures for the most common afflictions, there are many more to learn about," Rainstone mewed.

"Can you show them to me?" Scorch almost begged, jumping around her mother's legs.

"You like them that much?" her mother asked her, turning wide dark blue eyes on her. Scorch nodded vigorously, she could sense her mother's acute shock that she was so interested in them.

"Yep! I love learning things!" Scorch giggled. Rainstone looked unconvinced but Scorch sensed her amusement.

"Well, Needlepine isn't back yet," Rainstone commented with a hit of worry. He still hadn't come back from hunting before the storm.

"He'll be back," Scorch assured her mother, she didn't know how she knew, but she could just... sense it.

"I'm sure he will be, but he may have been forced to find shelter somewhere, and then we have to go to sleep hungry tonight," Rainstone huffed. Scorch glanced at her mother, she knew her annoyance was just to cover her fear, she did that so much Scorch didn't need to feel it out of her.

Scorch went and flopped into the nest on her belly while her mother watched the rain silently from the den entrance, waiting for Needlepine. *Watermint is far stomachache; it grows near water, and smells like... watery mint. Comfrey roots can be used for swelling and broken bones; grows in wet soil and the roots looks knobby, like chervil which can be used for infection...*

Scorch's run-through of herbs was interrupted by a loud bang that made her jump to her paws with fur on end and heart racing ridiculously fast. "W-what was t-that?" Scorch asked shakily, looking

around, slightly shocked nothing was out of place.

Rainstone turned her head toward her kit with an amused expression. "That was thunder, we haven't seen that since you were newborn, it sometimes comes with storms," Rainstone explained with a laughing twinkle in her eyes as she looked at her terrified daughter.

"Is it always so loud?" Scorch complained, trying not to look as scared as she still felt. It was ruined when a flash followed by an even louder crash sent her squealing into the air. "Now what was that flash?!" she cried.

"That was lighting, it comes before the thunder," Rainstone laughed, pulling her over to her. "Come watch, you won't be so scared then," Rainstone pulled her reluctant kit to the entrance of the den where the wind blew a light spray of rain into their faces as the roar of the sea drowned out words.

Scorch looked around suspiciously, determining to not be caught off guard by the thunder again. Yet when the flash and crash came, she jumped back from the entrance and even though she muffled her squeak of terror, she was still shaking when she came back to sit with her mother.

What is this?! She asked herself miserably. The lightning flashed so brilliantly it hurt her eyes, and the thunder made it sound like the sky was crashing, and the particularly loud ones set the den shaking, as if it would break apart at any time.

But she could feel her annoying curiosity that kept her coming back to watch for the next flash when the thunder sent her skittering away. The rain was still coming down heavily and the thunder and lightning raged through the clouds when her father finally returned.

"Thanks goodness," Rainstone let out a long sigh of relief, pressing herself against the side of her soaked mate.

"Sorry it took so much time, I was going to try and wait the storm out, but then it started to get dark, so I just hurried back here as fast as I could with the food," Needlepine apologized, nodding at

the sodden mice he'd caught.

"Well, as long as you're safe now, it's alright," Rainstone sighed. Scorch knew she was too relived right now to reprimand her mate for making her worry. *She's so sweet sometimes*, Scorch laughed inside at her parent's soppy love. But at the same time, she dreamed of finding a mate that she could feel that way about.

After Rainstone dried off Needlepine, they set down into the mice, one for each, though Needlepine ended up finishing Scorch's unfinished meal after her small belly was full. "Let's go to sleep now," Rainstone announced. The light had faded much faster than normal, and they were left in pitch black as they tripped over each other to the nest.

Scorch, exhausted mentally from studying herbs all day, fell asleep almost instantly. But she thought as she fell asleep, that the ocean sounded much louder than usual.

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"Your journey begins now." Scorch jerked her head up with a gasp, trying to see anything in the black den. She was shaking between from where she laid, tumbled just out of the nest. *Song's words, in my dream?*

She got to her paws unsteadily, unable to make sense of up or down in the complete darkness. But she did notice a few things seemed strange. Did the sound of lapping water always sound so loud? And why did the rain sound even heavier than before?

Stepping forward, she let out a startled sound as her paws splashed in water. She stepped backward again, confused as to why water was in the den, before she realized. *The ocean level is already raised to our den?!*

Horrified adrenaline raced through her as she turned back to where she knew the nest was and woke her parents quickly. "The den is flooding!" She wailed in their ears, jerking them into the same horrified conscious she was in.

"We've got to get out and to the top of the cliffs," Rainstone ordered, her voice ivy calm, but Scorch sensed her panic below the calm face.

"Scorch, where are you?" Needlepine's voice came from the mouth of the den and the splash of water told her he was in the water.

"I'm right here," she mewed in a frightened voice, splashing in the cold water for her father. She shivered at the cold and felt a surge of relief as Needlepine located her and grabbed her scruff.

"Kay, I af Corch," Needlepine mumbled to Rainstone around her scruff.

"Okay, I'll lead the way," her mother mewed, setting her tail in front of Needlepine's whiskers so he could follow her.

Scorch scrunched up her eyes and hugged her legs tight to her as they left the shelter of the den and she was whiplashed with freezing rain that made her shiver uncontrollably, loosening her father's grip on her.

They started up the trail, splashing water the first few tail-lengths until they stepped on the muddy sand that was flowing in thick streams down toward the water. Needlepine grunted in exertion as he tried to follow his lighter-pawed mate.

Half way up the cliffs, and several tail-lengths above the water, Needlepine tripped. With a squeal, Scorch hit the slippery sand and started slipping down as her father tried to keep his own hold, yowling out her name frantically.

"I'm here!" Scorch's cries were cut off as she slipped into the water. She struggled to stand up, but her claws only hooked loose sand, so she was tumbled back and forth in the waves.

She screamed silently and frantically as salt water filled her mouth and nose, just like before when she'd been swept into the water. But then, the waves had gently bounced her to the surface, allowing her to catch her breath and call to her mother.

But this time, she was tumbled over and over in the black water,

able to only splutter out water and gasp a breath when she breached the surface. She tried to move her paws, but the cold water froze her limbs and she sank out of consciousness, knowing nothing but blackness and the echoing cries of her parents.

...

"What a storm, huh?" the silky voice that touched his ears belonged to a white she-cat with dark tinged tips and glowing yellow eyes.

"Humph," he responded unhappily. The she-cat tisked and then went to their den, leaving him alone for the night. Rain and wind swirled in the air and the flashes of lighting and rumbles of thunder did nothing to stir his heavy heart.

He wasn't usually like this, but the storm had put him in a mind wandering mood, and he was revisiting past memories right now. *"Aren't storms exciting? The rush of the world exploding in one place!"* A familiar voice echoed in his mind, but there was nothing mystic about it, it was just memory.

Night sighed heavily; almost four seasons had passed since he'd last heard that voice. It had whispered a thankful and hurried goodbye, then left forever. *Rainstone didn't have a choice to leave the mountains, if she had stayed, her father would have killed her, heck, and I'm the one who helped her escape!*

The cold wind blew on his black fur and he narrowed his amber eyes. No matter how hard he tried to forget and move on, he couldn't. Nights like this would bring up memories, and he'd think about her until the dawn shone through.

"Hey, you still up?" a lazy voice sounded near his ear and he turned to see one of his closest friends and the group jokester.

"Yeah, Sun, I'm obviously still up," Night laughed drily.

The young, bright yellow-orange tom eyes him with glinted amber eyes that burned into his mind. Sun flicked his ear with a dark shaded paw and yawned, "You thinking of Rainstone?" he asked, looking away.

Night looked back at the storm, flicking off a vine of ivy that waved onto his paw from the ivy curtain that swayed over most of the entrance. "Maybe."

Sun didn't say anything for a long moment, "Do you think she'd want you to be caught up on her? You know how Rainstone was, always moving on, looking for something, needing something that she couldn't find here. She's happier now," Sun mewed.

"If she's even still alive," Nigh grumbled pessimistically. A lone she-cat heading out alone while carrying kits? It wouldn't surprise him to know he'd sent her to her death. But somehow he knew she'd made it somehow, and he was constantly wondering what their kits were like.

"Oh, she's definitely still kicking out there, Rainstone was the best friend I ever had, and I know she can't be defeated very easily. Besides, she was going to be killed *because* she could take care of herself, she's perfectly fine," Sun assured him.

"Yeah, I know, but... I still can't help but wonder sometimes, you know?" Night sighed.

"Of course I do, but you have a new mate, Tinge is waiting for you in your den, and you have two tom kits now as well, everyone's happy about it," Sun pointed out.

Night took on a fond look as he thought about his two young kits, Stone and Pine; Stone after Rainstone, and Pine because he and Rainstone had often taken walks to a grove of pine trees. They were perfect and all he'd wanted. But he still wanted to meet his other kits.

Night looked up as a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. *"Rainstone! Help me!"* He looked around, startled as a voice seared through his head. It was high-pitched, and definitely female, and rigged with panic.

Was that a kit's voice? And why was it calling to Rainstone? I must be getting old... I start visiting past memories, and I begin hearing things!

Chapter 3: Never Alone

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"She's just... gone," Rainstone's voice was a hollow whisper as she stared unseeingly at the gray waves of the ocean. Three days had passed since the night they had been flooded out of their den and they'd.... lost Scorch.

They'd searched for the whole three days, but hadn't been able to find her. *Out in so much water... there's no conceivable way we could find her. And if we did find her body, there's no way she could still be alive.*

The harsh reality of her thoughts crumbled down on her heart. *How could I lose all my kits?! First mine and Night's are born dead, and then my daughter is washed away? Does the world have something against me?*

"I'm sorry," Needlepine's guilt ridden voice was almost sobbing.

She turned to look at her mate, his bright green eyes were dull with sadness and grief and his shoulders shook. Rainstone felt a rush of compassion for her mate, she didn't blame him. It wasn't his fault he slipped, wasn't his fault he couldn't catch Scorch in the total darkness.

But their daughter's screams would haunt them both for moons to come, she was sure of it. That horrible, unmistakable feeling that you are helpless to help the helpless. She'd never felt it so sharp then she did that night.

But nothing could be done, they'd scoured the shores and ocean, if Scorch wasn't there, she wasn't there. Rainstone turned her dark eyes on Needlepine, nudging him. "Come on, we'll see her again, when we join the stars. Now... let's go home together no and never forget her."

...

This is ridiculous; no prey ever is on the open shore. Painted sighed in slight annoyance as she scanned the sandy shore for movement. The gray sky gave gray light on the gray water. It looked drab to say the least.

If Mira and Jump are just snuggling together someplace, I'm going to pull their whiskers! Painted walked across the sand, her white paws sinking into the sand. She wondered if her pelt stood out to much on this landscape and was scaring away the prey.

Although her fur was a pale cream, her paws and tail-tip were white, and the rest of fur was spotted with orange, white, and black spots. Then her bright green eyes assured her that she was meant to just hunt in forests.

Those stupid Clan-cats, causing such a ruckus and driving us away, some cat needs to shut them up. She had used to live in a city, had homeowners in fact, but they'd died and she'd turned rogue with her sister. Then her sister had met the, 'love of her life,' as she so often put it.

But when the Clan cats started recruiting rogues, those who didn't accept the offer were targeted by those who did. So she, her sister, and her sister's mate had left the city and been travelling around for a while now. Finally settling down on a bare, open landscape that she personally hated by the other two loved.

They're insane, that's the only explanation for it! Painted scowled, but halted as she saw a flicker of moment. *A bunny! Excellent!* Crouching down, she skillfully crept forward just as her mate had showed her. She flinched inwardly when she thought of her mate.

Now! With a leap that kicked up sand, she landed on the bunny and finished it off quickly. *Good, that'll feed two of us, now just something more...* She turned her head expectantly with the fresh-kill in her jaws. *What the heck is that?*

Her eyes spotted an abrasion on the melancholy landscape. Instead of pale sand or gray, it was a splash of dark red and orange color

with some black. *Is it a fox or something?* Fear coursed through her at the thought of a fox, but she assured herself it was way too small to be a fox. Besides, it looked dead anyways.

Moving down the gentle sandy slope, she approached the clump of sodden fur that was rammed against a fallen log with waves lapping over it. *Oh my stars! It's a fricken kit!* Painted dropped the dead bunny on the sand and raced for the kit whose back legs and tail were still waving in the water.

My gosh! Did it get swept away by that big storm a few days ago?! Painted wondered as she grabbed the sodden scruff of the kit and pulled it up onto the dry shore. *Is it alive?* She looked and couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the faint rise and fall of the chest.

It survived! It's a miracle! Painted blinked her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things, than worked on massaging the kit's chest just as she'd seen another rogue do when their friend had fallen in a river and almost drowned.

It had worked then and it worked now as the kit suddenly started hacking and coughing up mouthful after mouthful of water. When the she-kit had finished, for it was a she-kit, the small cat lay panting and gasping with her eyes still closed for a moment.

"Hey, kit, can you hear me?" Painted asked, nudging the kit's shoulder.

"Mh-hmm," the she-kit hummed lightly, taking in a deep breath before starting to move to sit up and opening her eyes, revealing twin black eyes. *No*, Painted looked closer and saw they were just a very dark green.

"What's your name, kit?" Painted asked, steadying the swaying kit as she sat up and stared around in stupor.

"Scorch," the kit had a hint of an accent that Painted had never heard before. And, being from the city where many cats from everywhere lived, that was rare. The kit, Scorch, turned her wide eyes on Painted. "Who are you?"

"My name is Painted," she introduced herself, checking to see if the kit was injured by anything but being half-drowned. *Amazing, a few bumps is all she's got.*

"Because of your fur?" Scorch asked.

"Well, yeah, I used to be called Dot, but I changed it later," Painted mewed.

"'Dot,'? Who named you that?" Scorch asked, eyes confused.

She's not very good at figuring out the bigger picture, is she? Painted thought, but answered anyways. "My homeowners called me that, but I changed it when I left," Painted explained, nudging the kit to her paws. She frowned, "Do you need me to carry you?"

Scorch didn't seem to hear, "What are homeowners?"

"Err, Twolegs," Painted mewed, using the name mostly used by rogues.

"What are those?" the kit asked, turning her too-big gaze on her again.

"They're tall, pale pink creatures with hair on their head, they are mostly harmless, and sometimes cats live with them," Painted explained. "Haven't you ever seen them?"

Scorch shook her head. *Humph, sheltered brat.* "How old are you?" she asked, looking the kit up and down. The kit's ears just barely brushed her stomach, and though she knew she was on the taller side, that was kind of small for a kit of three moons.

"Four moons old," Scorch responded with kit-like pride. Painted looked at her stolidly, hiding her doubt. "What? You don't believe me?" Scorch pouted, looking offended.

Painted frowned, "How do you know I didn't believe you?" she asked. She'd always thought she was a master at hiding what she was really feeling. But a kit could figure her out?

Scorch shrugged, looking around the beach curiously. "I dunno, I

could just tell."

Weird kit. "Well, where do you live? Do you live near here?" Painted asked, wondering how long it'd take to escort this kit home.

"I don't recognize this place... I mean, I recognize the ocean, but not this beach," the kit mewed, sounding frightened. "Do you know where a beach with cliffs is?" Scorch looked up at her was dark, hopeful eyes.

Painted frowned, she'd never seen a beach with cliffs before. "Sorry kit, I don't. But maybe my friends will know, they've travelled a lot more than me. Come on, let's go ask them," Painted mewed, nudging the small kit and watching sharply as Scorch stood unsteadily on her paws and wobbled a bit on her paws.

But she seemed to get more sure-pawed and Painted nodded, grabbing the bunny on the sand and leading the way back to her home. *Gosh, even when I decide to go hunting alone, I'm never able to return alone!*

...

Scorch glanced at the strange she-cat she was following; Painted, she had called herself. Scorch thought it was a strange name, but it suited the she-cat anyways. She didn't know why, but she felt amazingly light-headed and numb in her paws, as if she'd been sleeping on them.

Her head spun as she looked around; keeping her eyes wide open as she tried to steady the swirling colors. It seemed like they were on a beach, warm sand cushioning her toes, but there were no tall cliffs, just a gentle slope away from the water with patches of harder earth and grass.

She refocused on the cat she was following, wondering how she'd gotten here wasn't going to give her answers. Painted didn't look back at her, though Scorch saw her ears twitch back every now and then to pick up on her muffled paw-steps and make sure she was still following.

That cat is so tall! At least a whole mouse-length taller than her mother, maybe even a whisker taller than her father. Scorch could sense Painted's sharp worry for her, which touched her since she'd only just met this cat. But she could also feel the she-cat's apathetic sadness that ran deep and cold through her.

She lost something very precious to her long ago... but what? "Who are these cats we're going to see?" Scorch asked in an effort to get the she-cat to talk and find out what that sadness was.

"My sister and her mate, I live with them right now," Painted responded, giving her a quick glance over her shoulder.

"Did you live with someone else before?" Scorch asked in innocence. She could feel Painted getting tenser.

"Yes," the she-cat answered curtly, and Scorch sensed the disquiet these questions were causing. She decided to let it rest for now, not wanting to upset the cat that was helping her.

Scorch plodded forward, tiring quickly as she tried to keep up with the taller she-cat's long stride. "How much further?" she panted lightly, gulping in deep breaths of the salty air.

"Not muff further," Painted mewed, her mouth still muffled by the bunny.

"Okay," Scorch sighed, determining to just last it out.

They finally approached a little hollow in the ground where a prickly bush grew out of a cracked rock, making a curtain as it arched from the top of the rock and fell to the ground. "This is it?" Scorch asked, eyeing the prickly bush suspiciously.

Painted nodded and halted, dropping the rabbit and calling out. "I'm back! And I brought a guest!"

"Hope it's not a troublesome guest," a male voice responded from the cave. He had the same accent as Painted, kind of like Needlepine's, but with a hint of huskiness on some words.

"Naw, she couldn't be more trouble if she were dead," Painted

responded, moving forward and signaling with her tail for Scorch to follow.

The red kit did, though she flicked her black paw over her black ear in assurance of luck with these cats. "And just who is this cat?" a giggling voice asked. Scorch watched as a soft gray tabby she-cat stepped out to greet Painted.

"Her," Painted jerked her head at Scorch and then disappeared into the den without another word.

"Humph, she could at least introduce me," the gray tabby she-cat grumbled before turning her smiling amber eyes toward Scorch. "Now, what's your name darling?"

Scorch took an instant liking to the happy aurora that surrounded this cat and the laughing bubble beneath her voice. "I'm, Scorch!" She introduced herself happily, looking up at the she-cat wide amber eyes.

"What a great name!" the tabby she-cat laughed, patting her head just like Scorch's mother would. For a heartbeat she felt homesick, and wondered how long it'd take to get back home. "My name is Mira, by the way," the gray tabby she-cat introduced herself; flicking her large, pointed ears happily.

"It's good to meet you!" Scorch mewed, waving her tail. But then she felt a wave of tiredness wash over her and she remembered the ache in her legs. She let out a long yawn, looking at Mira hopefully.

Mira giggled, "Come on, kit, let's go into the den and then you can rest while I talk to my annoying sister," she mewed, nudging her gently toward the dark den.

"You mean Painted?" Scorch clarified tiredly.

"Unfortunately; she's a real pain sometime, but she can be sweet when she wants to be," Mira whispered laughingly into her ear. "But don't tell her I said that!" Mira added with a laugh that Scorch giggled along to.

She didn't know what is was about this cat, but she couldn't but feel

happy around her. *How could Painted not be affected?* Going into the den, Scorch found it brighter then she'd thought it'd be, and more spacious with three nests surrounding the main sitting area.

She saw Painted munching on part of the bunny she'd been carrying in one of the nests, ignoring their entrance. "That's my mate, Jump," Mira mewed, pointing at a smaller white tom with a torn ear and frayed whiskers.

He raised his sharp green eyes to her as she stared and she lowered her gaze quickly. She sensed this cat wasn't dangerous, but that he was suspicious. "Jump, this is Scorch, she's going to rest here for a while," Mira mewed in a tone Scorch hadn't heard her take yet, it was firm and allowed no argument.

Jump just sighed and nodded as Mira hustled her into the nest that smelled of her. "Thank y-" Scorch's thanks was cut off by a massive yawn.

Mira laughed lightly, "Shh, just sleep for now, we'll talk later."

Scorch didn't need to be told twice, and drifted off into comfortable blackness almost instantly.

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When she awoke a while later, she didn't jump to her paws or open her eyes, but just cherished the sensation of resting and focused on her ears to tell her what was happening. Though her nose quickly told her all three cats were in the den.

"She's been sleeping all day," Painted's slightly annoyed tone reached her first and she knew they were talking about her.

"It's to be expected, if I was washed away into the ocean and somehow survived, I'd sleep for three days straight!" Mira's soft tone sounded next.

"Where do you think she's from? I haven't a clue," Jump's rough voice dampened Scorch's hopes of a fast return home.

"She said she lived on a beach with cliffs, but I've never seen any

cliffs on the beach before, have you?" Painted was asking the other two cats and Scorch's hopes rose.

"Well..." Mira started, "You know Jump and I travelled a lot when we left the city a few seasons back, and we mostly travelled along the beach..." Mira sighed and trailed off.

"Well? Did you find any cliffs?" Painted asked impatiently.

"That's the problem, we did, lots and lots of cliffs, we travelled for moons along beach and cliffs, we never reached an end to them, for all we know, it could be a season's journey from here, and the kit obviously doesn't know, not only that, but I wouldn't even know which direction to head in, there are cliffs along the beach both ways," Jump mewed quietly.

"But the kit's parents must be worried sick," Painted mewed with a hint of sympathy.

"I'm sure they probably think she's dead," Jump mewed heavily.

Scorch's heart pounded heavy in her chest. Her parents thought she was dead? That'd break their hearts! She wished she could tell them that's he was alright and on her way home again.

"Your journey will not take you backward, but forward." Scorch stiffened as Song's voice echoed in her head. *"But I will go with you, so you won't ever be alone."* Somehow, that didn't make Scorch feel better as she shivered and sank back into the retreat of sleep.

Chapter 4: Prey and Predator

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"So, Scorch, how old are you?" Jump asked her in a rather monotone voice, as if he didn't care. However, Scorch could tell that he was actually curious about her.

But why does every cat ask me that question? Scorch was confused about it, "Four moons," she responded once more. And, once again, surprise emanated from the cat who asked the question. Both Painted and Mira had been shocked by her answer.

Is it that unbelievable? "Why does everyone seemed surprised by that?" Scorch asked, curious about their odd reactions.

"Well, you are a little on the... smaller side of four moons. I would have guessed three moons at the most," Jump shrugged.

"Well, you aren't that tall either, are you? You're no bigger than my mom," Scorch huffed defensively, though she thought Jump was just a tiny bit taller than Rainstone.

At the moment, they were the only two in the den, Mira and Painted had gone off hunting and Jump was keeping an eye on her. She'd been staying with these cats for two days now, and she was starting to get anxious about how long it'd take for her to get home.

Sure, Jump had said getting home was impossible, but she didn't really believe that. She'd find her parents again soon, she was sure of it. *No... my head is convinced I'm sure of it, but I feel in my heart it could be a very long time before I see them again.*

That odd, frightening dismal feeling swept over her. It felt so cold, and lonely, she didn't like it and tried her best to avoid it. But in her situation, it was hard to keep pessimistic feelings away for good. "Do you think I can get home?" she voiced her doubt in a small voice, hoping he wouldn't think of this as her giving up hope.

Jump looked at her for a long moment, his ripped ear twitched and his sharp green eyes softened just slightly. "I don't think it's impossible, but it may take a lot of hard work. I've been asking the passing rogues around here if they've seen your parents, but nothing has turned up yet," he mewed.

"But some cat might know, right?" Scorch asked optimistically.

"Maybe, only time will tell. For now, it seems Mira's taken a liking to you, so we're letting you stay here, but not for free," Jump warned, getting to his paws.

"What do you mean?" Scorch asked, jumping up from her small, makeshift nest she'd pulled together yesterday.

"It means, you're going to help hunt," Jump mewed, waving his tail and inviting her outside.

Excitement coursed through her. *Yes! Imagine mom and dad's faces when I come home and I can already hunt!* "Okay! How do you hunt?" Scorch asked, bouncing around Jump's paws as they exited the shady den.

"What? Didn't your parents already teach you?" Jump looked at her cryptically.

"Nope!" Scorch shook her head shamelessly.

Jump groaned and tilted his head back to glare at the sky. "Okay.... Fine, I'll teach you the basics. It's not that difficult, but you have to *pay attention*!" he emphasized the last two words and Scorch nodded with a serious expression on her face, ready to memorize all she was taught.

They left the little hollow and walked until they were on a wide expanse of white sand that was edged with cracked dirt and clumps of straggly grass. "Okay, when you spot prey, the first thing you want to do is crouch and make sure you're downwind of it, so the prey doesn't detect you," Jump mewed, exhibiting the hunting crouch.

Scorch eyed the position of his muscles for a moment before

crouching, copying the position. "Hmm, not bad," Jump mewed grudgingly, though Scorch sensed his approval and knew she was doing it right.

"Now start moving forward, the sand helps, but you want to step lightly and slowly so as to not make a sound," Jump explained, picking up each paw and slowly creeping forward.

Scorch frowned, finding it more difficult to balance while moving so slowly in that crouched position. "Use your tail, but keep it above the sand," Jump offered, sitting up to watch her concentrated stalk.

Scorch waved her tail side to side as she moved forward, leaning from one side to the next. She sat up when she reached Jump, feeling as if she'd done a good job. "Not bad, though I doubt you could pull it off on solid ground," Jump mewed.

Scorch willed for there to be a lie in his voice, as if he was just being tougher one her. But she didn't sense it, and knew he was serious when he said that. *I guess I need a lot more work.*

"Your pelt may also be a problem..." Jump mused, looking at her with those hunter-sharp eyes again.

Scorch frowned, looking at her dark red and orange fur. "What's wrong with it?" she asked. Then she noticed her red paw against the white sand. *Oh...* It looked like a splash of dark crimson blood on the pale white sand.

"What can I do about it?" she asked, confused as to how she could possibly change her pelt.

"Well, hunting around the rocks and the bushes may help hide it from sight, but there aren't many good hunting places like that around here. You'll just have to be smart about how you move," Jump shrugged.

Obviously, he didn't have to worry about her problem, as his dirty white fur was almost the exact same color as the sand they were on right now, and it blended in just as well with the pale gray rocks. *He probably actually has no idea what I should do about my fur, since*

Mira's gray and even Painted's base cream fur blends in well enough.

Scorch frowned, trying to figure out how to hunt on this bare, open, pale landscape. "Well, happy hunting," Jump mewed, turning away.

"Wait, I'm hunting right now?" Scorch asked, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Why else would I show you how to hunt? Now, you better get going, if you don't catch anything, you don't eat," Jump mewed over his shoulder. "We're giving you a safe place to sleep, not free meals," Jump mewed, bounding away.

But I don't even know where the den is anymore! Then she calmed herself down, reminding herself she simply had to follow her scent trail back again. *Okay, now look for something to eat, I know what prey smells like.*

Lifting her head to the wind, she took quick sniffs, trying to find some scent other than the ocean breeze. But the salty water filled the air and she decided she'd have to spot something with her eyes. Moving forward carefully and quietly, she flashed her eyes from side to side as she crept through a stalk of grass.

She stiffened as she saw a flash of movement. *Hmm?* Freezing in place, she slowly moved her head and spotted a mouse scuffling among the bases of the tall stalks of grass. Excitement coursed through here, *this is it! This will be my very first catch!*

Trying to press down her excitement into energy, she crouched just as Jump had showed her, and started creeping toward the mouse while using the sparse clumps of grass for cover. *This is it!* She could almost feel the mouse warm and limp in her mouth.

Her belly rumbled in reminder at what was at stake here. *If I don't catch this, I don't eat!* She crept closer, closer, unsheathing her claws and sinking them into the sand as she stalked forward. She believed she could feel the tiny vibrations of the little creature's heartbeat as she got closer.

She paused in her careful creeping, holding her breath as she

gathered herself to leap. Then she blinked, the mouse was scuttling away quickly and she hadn't even moved! She sat up abruptly and stared after her escaped meal in angry confusion.

"You were downwind of it, it could smell you even though it couldn't see you," a voice spoke from behind her, startling her into spinning around.

"Painted!" she breathed out in relief as she stared at the spotted cream cat.

"Do you even know how to hunt?" Painted asked snappily, not responding to her greeting.

A little taken back by her sharp tone, she took a deep breath. "Not really, but I'm sure I'll figure it out," Scorch responded, absent-mindedly flicking her black paw over her black ear.

"Hmm... If you don't catch something, you won't eat," Painted turned away with a slight frown.

"I know! I'll find something to eat!" Scorch called to the retreating figure over the sandy ground. She sat down with a huff and frowned. *What is that cat's problem? She never looks happy!*

Deciding it wasn't worth the thought at the moment, Scorch recalled what had been said. "*You were downwind of it, it could smell you even though it couldn't see you*." That's what Painted had said, and, when Scorch turned the way she'd been facing while stalking the mouse, she did indeed feel the wind blowing over her back and her head, blowing her scent toward where the mouse had been.

She frowned dejectedly; her first catch hadn't turned out as a catch after all. *But now I've learned something!* She thought, stubbornly finding a gain to her loss. *I'll remember next time to check where the wind is coming from, and my stalking was just fine! I think.*

Scorch lifted her head to the sea-wind, but again couldn't distinguish one scent from another in the salty air. Walking carefully and quietly around the sandy slopes, she searched for prey on the slopes but couldn't find anything.

How do cats even hunt?! I can't find anything! Starting to get frustrated, she pouted and sat down, digging her paws in the sand and feeling the ocean breeze wash over her. It flowed in her mind and she swayed to the movement, feeling the earth sway with the ocean's roar.

She opened her eyes slowly until they were as big as they could get. The pastel colors were even more muted and everything seemed toned gray. *I know this sensation...* It was the feeling she got whenever she saw her mirages. An odd sensation as if the whole world was spinning around her but she stayed still.

It's the earth's memories, that's what Song said, wasn't it? Looking around slowly, she stared as she saw a cat crouched much like how she'd been while hunting, and creeping forward steadily. She didn't see anything, but the mirage cat was approaching a clumpy pile of rocks on the sandy slope. It darted forward smoothly and hooked its paw into a crack.

Scorch didn't see any prey, but the mirage cat seemed to have caught something as it pinned an invisible presence under its paw and quickly dispatched it. *So prey hides in rocks?* The thought served as a jerk to her trance and she closed her eyes as she felt flung away for the mirage and the rush off the world fell away. She then found herself sitting just as she had been before she'd seen the mirage.

No... things never get any clearer... It had never worked before that I saw what I was thinking of. She sighed, but then giggled to herself, excited about what she'd just learned. *So prey likes to hide in rocks?* She got to her paws and started creeping toward the rock pile the mirage cat had caught its prey.

She stiffened as she got closer, only a tail-length away, and heard the clip of tiny claws against stone. *Rabbit!* The scent filled her nostrils and made her belly rumble again. *I can do this, okay. So, I'm downwind, it can't see me, but I can't see it.*

Frowning, she thought hard for a moment as she decided how she'd get the rabbit out. *I could scare it, but if I scared it from here, it'd just go deeper in the hole, and if I scare it from the other side, then I don't think I'd get back over here in time to catch it.*

Then she found the solution, though it may not work. Hooking a loose stone that had crumbled from the stone pile, she hooked it up in her paw and flung it to the other side of the rock pile. Her ears twitched as she heard its clack as it landed, but no rabbit came out, though she could now sense its fear and knew it was on edge.

Maybe one more will do it... grabbing another piece, a slightly larger one, she threw it and heard it hit near the top of the pile and then fall down with resounding clacks. *There!* The bunny shot out and she jumped after it like a flash.

Got it! She caught the bunny in her small paws and struggled with it for a moment until she dug her teeth into its neck and felt it slowly stop moving. "Phew!" she let out an exhilarated breath of relief as she sat back and looked at her catch, very pleased with herself.

It was a small bunny, probably only half-grown, but for her, it still dragged the ground when she picked it up and tilted her head back with a grunt of effort. *Okay, now to find my way back*. She walked back to the top of the sandy hollow she was in now and looked around.

All the sandy slopes and hills looked the same to her and she couldn't pick up her scent with the bunny filling her senses. *Now what?* She tried to remember which way she'd come from, but couldn't. *Well, I'm sure if I wander around I'll find someone*.

Because she thought the den wasn't far from the ocean, she headed in the direction the wind was coming from, hoping she'd run across her scent trail or the scent trail of one of the other cats. But the light was getting dimmer and she knew it was nearing dusk while she was still out wandering alone.

Maybe I ought to just eat now and then find my way back, so I don't have to carry this the rest of the way. Deciding that was a good idea, she dropped the prey and tore into it, savoring the soft meat, even though the warmth of the fresh-kill had already dissipated.

Mhm-hmm, that was good; Scorch smiled to herself and licked her whiskers, cleaning them of their last scraps in full contentment. I don't think any food has ever tasted so good! She decided to give

the flavorful food as credit to it being her first catch.

But a sudden scent snapped her out of her sluggish drowse. She stood up stock-stiff, it smelled dirty and disgusting, the scent that filled her nose. She felt the trembles through the loose sand and she got the acute sensation that she was being watched. Unseen eyes boring into her and scrutinizing her like she had done to her prey earlier that day.

Wait... I know this smell, father once tracked one, but what did he say it was? She didn't have long to wonder as a premonition of danger swept over her in the dusk light. *Whatever it is, it's dangerous*. Scorch was shivering, but refused to let the rest of her be scared, for the sake of not taking on a fear-scent.

She looked around the bare, sandy beaches that were shadowed in gray as the sun sank lower into the sea that she could hear was not far away. She didn't see anything moving, but she knew something was out there, watching her, and it frightened her more that she did not know what it was.

There. The sensation of danger grew stronger as she stared at a pair of twin beady black eyes in the hill's shadow. *That's right... father called it a fox*. The thought flashed in her mind as the fox let out a fearsome snarl and raced for her, jaws snapping.

Heart jumping to her throat, fear forced her to turn and flee without a second thought. Her tiny paws kicked up the sand as she sprinted away, not knowing where she was going, but just knowing she was getting away.

She looked over her shoulder and saw a massive dark red beast chasing her with evilly glinting black eyes and an open mouth to show razor-sharp teeth. With its hot breath on her paws, it was all too easy to imagine those teeth tearing into her.

Its hunting me! But how do I get away?! I can't outrun it. Trying to think quickly while frantically tracing the best path over the sand in front of her, she tried to think of how to escape this fox on such a bare landscape. *There are no bushes, trees, or rocks for me to hide in... so what is there?!*

She frowned, feeling the salty air rush over her, pushing from behind her as the night land-breeze started up. The roar of the waves sounded close, but that was no help as to knowing where she was. *Wait a second! I got it!*

Feeling refreshed energy surge through her tiny body, she pushed herself to go faster, tiny paws flashing out and under her in frantic rhythm. She looked over her shoulder again; fear shocking through her as she saw the fox was almost on top of her, jaws open and eyes staring at her hungrily.

Just a little further! Narrowing her eyes in determination, she willed herself to go faster as her limbs started going numb from exhaustion. She raced over the last shadowed hill and could see the crashing waves of the ocean no more than ten tail-lengths away.

"Uhmph," Scorch was pulled back sharply and hit the ground on her belly. *No!* Fear screamed through her as she felt sharp claws on her back pin her to the ground, as two massive paws clamped on her, trapping her like a tiny mouse.

I was so close! She stared longingly at the waves that would have saved her as she felt sharp jaws clamp around her middle and lifting her up, crushing down on her tiny frame and shaking her until she didn't see anything but blackness.

Then it was gone, the pain, the sensation, the fear. *Am I dead?* Then it hit her, or more exactly, she hit it. The ground was soft and warm as sensations started flowing through her again. Each painful breath made it harder to sink into the darkness again.

Opening her closed eyes, she saw the dark gray light faintly illuminating two dancing shapes before her eyes. *Painted?* The cream she-cat's bright green eyes blazed with fury and fear as she flitted around the fox's attacks.

Scorch placed her trembling paws on the ground and forced herself into a standing position as she swayed back and forth. She looked back over her burnished red and orange fur. It was redder than usual, red from blood that flowed sluggishly from her sides over her ribs where bite marks were etched into her.

Is this bad? Her thoughts were moving hazily as she wondered if the wounds were enough to kill her. She turned to look back at the fight long enough to see Painted get a hard blow on the fox's head and then dart over to her.

"Time for a retreat," Painted muttered, grabbing her gently by the scruff and carrying her off her paws. Scorch didn't have the energy needed to protest against being carried or do anything but fall limp in Painted's swinging grasp.

"Good thing I'm so small," Scorch laughed weakly, reassuring herself and Painted that she'd be fine. Painted grunted her amusement as she raced away, her long legs carrying them both quickly away from the dazed fox that had had its certain meal snatched away.

"It looks like it's gone now," Painted sighed in relief, slowing down to a brisk jog.

"Good," Scorch sighed closing her eyes.

"Don't you fall asleep now," Painted's harsh mew jerked her awake and she nodded weakly. She understood the fear in Painted's tone, if she did fall asleep in that condition, she may not be waking up. But somehow, she knew she wasn't that seriously injured.

"Now, let's go home," Painted sighed.

Home... The word sounded so sweet to Scorch's ears, even though she knew she wasn't returning to her mother and father. Right now, her home was with Painted and her family. "Sounds good."

Chapter 5: Move Along

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It was morning by the time Scorch woke up, aching and thirsty. The den was dim with just faint golden light filtering through the spiky roofed den. *What happened?* Scorch wondered as she sat up groggily, yawning before snapping out of it as she remembered the encounter with the fox last night.

I must have fallen asleep on the way back. Looking around, the three other cats were in their nests sleeping restfully. Scorch glanced at her wounds, the bite marks weren't bleeding, but they were stinging in the open air. *Hmm...*

Scorch recalled the lesson on herbs that her mother had given her the day before she'd been swept away. She froze for a moment, thinking about her parents so far away and she felt the chill of fear, a different fear then from yesterday's flee from the fox, but fear nonetheless.

No, I'll get home. I will! Then she slowly got to her paws and hobbled to the corners of the den, grabbing the cobwebs she'd spotted in the untouched corners. She carefully bound her wounds with them, and wondered if there was any marigold growing nearby. The yellow flower's juices were supposed to be good for wounds in the fight against infection.

I'll ask the others when they wake up, she decided then left the den, desperate to get something to drink for her dry mouth. She walked carefully since the bites on her ribs, although dull in pain, still ached with every breath and step.

How long is it going to hurt? Scorch decided to focus on other sensations instead of the pain. The warm sand beneath her paws the fresh breeze on her face, and the early sunlight that shone warm and golden on her fur. She attempted to stretch appreciatively in the sunlight, but the screeching protest of her wounds stopped that

abruptly.

She paused beside the little pool of water in the sand, much like the pool back at her home that filled with rainwater. She looked at her reflection with the backdrop of the pale blue sky. Her orange and red fur was ruffled and sticking out strangely and her black markings sank into the depths of the pool. Her dark eyes hardly able to be seen as green in the pool.

She bent her head and lapped at the water, relishing the cool liquid in her throat. She lifted her head, water drops dripping from her whiskers as she looked around the early morning landscape. Seagulls were flying in the air and she spotted scuttling crabs and a passing jackrabbit.

She returned to the den and sat down in her nest, sighing in relief as the ache in her muscles relaxed. "Scorch, are you okay?" she looked to see Mira blinking at her sleepily from where she slept beside Jump.

"Yes, I'm fine," Scorch mewed in a small voice, nervous about what they'd say about her almost being eaten by a fox.

"That's good," Mira sighed in relief, getting up and padding softly over to her. "Painted said that you were almost eaten, but you didn't seem to badly injured," Mira nosed her with her soft gray nose and Scorch giggled at the ticklish touch.

"I'm okay, but how about Painted?" Scorch asked, looking worriedly at the cat that had rescued her now twice.

"She's fine, don't worry," Mira laughed softly, amber eyes twinkling. "Painted said the fox was young and inexperienced, she didn't even get hit once," Mira mewed as she lay down beside her. "When did your wounds get bandaged?" Mira asked curiously.

"I did it this morning, my mother had taught me about how to treat some injuries," Scorch mewed proudly.

Mira laughed softly, obviously trying not to wake the other two sleeping cats. "Your mother sounds like a pretty smart cat, what was

her name again?"

"Her name is Rainstone," Scorch mewed, she'd given the names of her parents to the three cats before so they could ask any rouges passing through if they knew her parents.

"Rainstone..." Mira mused. She'd done that the first time Scorch had told her that name as well; Jump had seemed perplexed as well. "You know, I feel as if I've heard that name before, but I can't place it," Mira chuckled sheepishly.

"Really?" Scorch pricked her ears in curiosity. "Did you ever meet her?" she asked in a voice piqued with curiosity.

Mira shook her head, "I've met lots of cats, so it's possible. But I really don't remember, it must have been a while ago," Mira mewed.

"Her accent is familiar too, though," Jump's voice startled them and Scorch looked to see the white tom still curled in a sleeping ball, but with one of his green eyes open.

"You know... I thought so too, but I don't know where I heard it from," Mira mused and Scorch sensed sincere curiosity from both cats, but they couldn't place a face to their knowledge.

"Well, maybe if we find my parents, you'll find out!" Scorch piped up.

"Wait a minute, who said we're going to find your parents?" Jump asked sharply.

"You did! You said it might take some work though," Scorch mewed.

"I meant for you!" Jump jumped to his paws, now wide-awake. "I'm not going on a wild goose-chase!" Jump protested.

"Then I'll go alone," Scorch huffed.

"But you can't defend yourself, you can barely hunt!" Jump argued.

"Then come help me!" Scorch returned in a pout.

"No!-but- no," Jump frowned, confused, while Mira laughed at her mate.

"You won't help me, but you don't want me to go alone, right? Then you're going to have to do one or the other!" Scorch huffed pointedly.

"You can just stay here until you're old enough to go off alone or until your parents show up," Mira mewed gently.

Scorch looked at her paws silently, she didn't want to wait; she wanted to do something. "I have no problem with helping her find her family," Painted's voice startled them.

"You're serious?!" Jump was the first to speak.

"Yes, I don't want a little brat in this den for too long, and I couldn't forgive myself if she died close enough for us to find the body," Painted mewed in apathetic calmness.

Scorch hid her giggles, she could sense that Painted just wanted to do something, just wanted to go somewhere. She was using her as an excuse to get away.

"Then it's decided! We're all going on a little trip to find Scorch's parents!" Mira announced.

"What?!" Jump looked at his mate as if she was crazy with his mouth hanging open. Scorch frowned to hide her smile and giggling.

"Don't worry, I doubt it'll take more than a moon, and we've got nothing better to do!" Mira mewed.

"Yeah, but when you say something will only take a moon, it turns into two moons, then three, then four, then-" Jump continued.

"Okay, we'll leave in a few days when Scorch is a bit better, so we ought to go hunt and build up our strength!" Mira mewed cheerily, cutting off her mate's protests.

"I give up!" Jump huffed, turning toward the entrance. "I'm going hunting!" he called angrily over his shoulder.

"Kay dear!" Mira laughed after him and Scorch could see Jump shaking his head with a fond look on his face.

"Well, at least it's something to do," Painted sighed.

Scorch laughed, "Yep, it's time to get moving along in the quest to find my parents!" she mewed.

"Since when was it a quest?" Painted asked.

"Since just now."

...

Scorch yawned and stretched in her nest. A few days had passed since the unlucky encounter with the fox, and things were almost ready for their journey. "Hey, Painted, are we leaving today?" Scorch asked, dangling her paws out of her nest.

"Maybe, I'll ask Jump. But the weather is good and you look bored to death, so I'll take it as a sign that you're ready to go," Painted mewed, looking up from eating her morning meal.

"I can't help that I'm bored, I never have anything to do," Scorch sighed, rolling on her back. Her wounds would still hurt if they were touched roughly, but if she was careful, they were just fine.

"You have too small of an attention-span," Painted muttered.

"No I don't!" Scorch protested.

"Yes, you do. Try focusing on something for more than thirty seconds," Painted suggested.

Scorch huffed and looked away for a moment. "Hey, Painted?" she turned back to the cream she-cat, curiosity thrumming beneath her paws.

"What?" Painted groaned.

"Mira said you had a mate, what happened to him?" Scorch braced herself, knowing fully well how touchy a subject this was from all of Painted's tension whenever the topic was brushed.

Painted gave her a long, hard stare that made her shrink beneath her pelt. But she kept the gaze, she couldn't help her curiosity, and it needed to be either answered or declined outright. "He's dead."

Those two, hard words hammered on Scorch's conscious for a moment. Her thoughts flying back to the one time when her mirages had been fighting and dying all around her in ghastly fashions. Scorch swallowed hard, looking at her paws.

"You had kits too, didn't you? Are they dead?" Scorch hadn't been told that Painted had once had kits, but due to several clumsy missteps in regards to it by Mira, she'd worked out that Painted had had kits at one time.

"Yes." Painted's low, hard growl answered her. It was the first time Scorch had ever felt unsafe around Painted and she dropped her gaze to her paws. She didn't move as the cream she-cat got up and left with quick stomps.

That could have gone better. But Painted's too angry looking at her past, she needs to move along and look back at her lost mate and kits in fondness; remembering the good times and not just the bad ending. Of course, Scorch could understand why Painted felt like she did, but she sensed the cream she-cat wanted to move past her anger, but something was stopping her, some fear was halting up her progress.

Scorch thought about that for a while, wondering why Painted wasn't allowing herself to move on and, not coincidentally, how she could help her new friend to move on. "Hey! Scorch!" Mira's bright, cheery voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes?" Scorch asked, catching onto Mira's excitement instantaneously.

"Jump says it's time to leave! So say goodbye to the den and let's go!" Mira looked like a kit herself with her amber eyes big and glowing as she bounced on her paws.

"Yes!" Scorch whooped and jumped out of her nest, racing for the entrance where Mira was standing. "Goodbye den!" she called and ran outside, giggling, with Mira.

"Ready to go?" Jump asked, giving his mate an amused look as he saw her excitement.

"Yep!" Mira laughed and nudged her mate, falling in at his shoulder as he turned away.

Scorch followed the two lovers while Painted stalked up ahead, glaring at nothing. With the bright sun reflecting against the pale sand, Scorch thought the landscape was almost blindingly bright and focused her eyes on the blue sky above the horizon instead, looking just between Painted's two white ears.

"Painted looks like she could kill, I wonder what's gotten under her fur," Mira commented from up ahead.

"And I thought she was the one who gave this ridiculous idea momentum in the first place," Jump grumbled.

Mira laughed and started teasing her mate. Scorch ignored the conversation, feeling almost embarrassed by their blatant show of affection for each other. She raced ahead of them to fall in step with Painted. The cream she-cat coolly ignored her.

"Where are we heading right now?" Scorch asked.

"The shore, we'll follow the beach until we find something," Painted answered shortly.

"Sounds good!" Scorch mewed cheerily, not really that concerned over Painted's abrasiveness. She'd touched on a subject Painted hadn't wanted to think about, and done so with full knowledge that Painted wouldn't be happy about it.

But when she gets over it, I'll be ready, Scorch reminded herself gently, letting Painted's anger sweep over her like a passing breeze that barely ruffled her fur. They walked in silence until they reached the ocean shore.

"Which way do we head?" Scorch asked as they all stood in a line with the water washing up near their paws.

"Well... if I recall, the storm that blew you in came from that direction," Mira angled her ears to the left.

"Great, that means we'll be skipping awfully close to Clan territory," Jump grumbled.

"Clans? I heard of those before," Scorch piped up.

"Really?" Mira looked at her curiously.

"Yeah!" Scorch remembered what her mother had told her the day before she'd been swept away. "My mother said that my father was once a Clan cat, he came from ShadowClan." Scorch mewed, than went quiet. She missed the feel of her mother's fur and her father's warm voice. She felt the sudden rush of loneliness shaded by gray over her eyes.

"Come on, the sooner we get moving, the sooner we get you home," Mira mewed kindly, nudging her softly.

"Yeah, let's go," Scorch drew in a shaky breath, realizing she had only been a few seconds away from tears. Everyday away from her parents was adding on the heaviness she felt pressing down on her. *But I won't cry! I won't give up!*

Scorch marched forward, putting on a determined face and walking with the other cats along the soft, sandy shore. "You okay, Scorch?" Painted asked, looking at her quickly.

"Yep! I'll be home soon! I can't wait," Scorch gave a sigh of relief at the thought of being home and everything going back to how it was. Then she thought of something, "But I'll miss you and the others, of course," she added quietly, feeling sad that when she went home her new friends would leave without her.

Painted laughed softly and ruffled her head, "Who knows, if you're close enough, we may just come to visit you," the cream she-cat purred optimistically.

Scorch felt a rush of thankfulness and appreciation toward the spotted cat. Even though she could tell Painted was still upset by her prying earlier, she'd out it aside for a moment to help cheer her up. She leaned into the soft cream she-cat for a moment.

"Thanks," she murmured, hoping all her feelings were told in that one word.

Painted tensed then relaxed for a moment, leaning down to nuzzle her head. "You're welcome, Scorch," she breathed.

Scorch smiled and blinked up at the tall cat, waving her tail. "Now we better go or Jump and Mira will leave us behind!"

Chapter 6: Old Haunts

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Scorch giggled as she splashed along the waves of water that washed gently over her paws. The foaming white water swirling up over her paws as they sunk into the dark sand and were soaked in the salty water. The bright sun, the pale beach, the bubbling water.... Yes, it almost seemed like she was back home.

"Scorch! Stop messing around, you're going to burn out your energy before we stop for the night," Jump reprimanded her.

"Sorry!" Scorch apologized cheerfully, not feeling sorry at all. It was more fun to travel along the beach when she could cool off her paws when they got too hot.

"Will we stop soon?" Mira asked from her usual spot at her mate's shoulder. She was looking out over the water where the sun was lowering, starting to turn orange in color and warning the approaching dusk.

Painted paused from where she was leading the travelling band of cats. "I'd wished to get further from the city before we stopped for the night, but I guess we can stop now," the cream she-cat shrugged.

"Well, if we're so near the city, I'd like to say hi to some of my littermates who are still living there. Might as well since we've come this far," Jump mewed with a note of disdain. *I guess he doesn't really like his littermates, but he feels obligated*, Scorch thought.

She looked at Painted sheepishly, although tension between them had eased in their two days of travelling so far, she could sense Painted was still often thinking about her questions and that was staying a tad bit colder with her. Scorch wished Painted would hurry and forgive her completely; it was starting to wear on her nerves that her two questions had upset her friend so much to keep

a grudge for days.

Wait... "You said the city? Like the one near the Clans?" she asked curiously, turning to Mira.

"Yep, that would be the one," Mira mewed with a slight frown, obviously not happy to see her old home again.

"Well?" Jump questioned, turning to his mate. "Should we venture in there tomorrow?"

Mira hesitated and looked at her sister for help, the one who was totally ignoring the conversation and intent on her own thoughts. "I guess it'd be okay, but we have to be quick to get in and out. Another thing, I don't want Scorch going in there," Mira mewed firmly and Scorch huffed.

"That's fine, I'll stay with Scorch on the beach then, there's nothing I want from that place," Painted mewed, suddenly showing she had indeed been paying attention.

"Okay, then that's settled. But let's find some place to sleep for tonight and then go hunting," Jump mewed, turning in land to go in search for shelter.

"Hey! How about this?" Scorch asked, bounding past Jump and skidding to a halt near the opening she'd spotted. It was a plain large, hollow scoop in the ground edged by thick, rough grass and tall, brown reeds. There was no top cover, but Scorch doubted it would rain for a few reasons, one being the wind was calm and there was no scent of rain.

"I guess it'll work for one night," Jump grumbled, Scorch sensed he wasn't happy about not having a cover for his head.

"Great! Then I'll keep watch over our nest while you three hunt!" Scorch gave out the orders while sitting down in the nest.

Jump groaned and Painted rolled her eyes, but they followed the kit's orders anyways. It was more sensible for the kit to stay in one place in a strange area anyway. *But I ought to do something... maybe find something soft for us to sleep on!*

Scorch nodded to herself and searched around near the hollow, snatching soft grass, stray feathers, and plush moss to lie in a nice cover over the dry, scratchy grass. There! Scorch thought in satisfaction as she patted the soft green covering smooth. That'll help for a good night's sleep!

Around then, the three other cats returned, each with a respectable catch that they shared until every cat was full. Scorch yawned and rolled on her side in the soft hollow while the three older cats talked as the sun's light fully disappeared.

"I didn't catch scent of anything dangerous, so I don't think we need a guard. It's probably too close to the city for foxes and badgers to really live here comfortably," Mira mewed.

"Hmm," Painted hummed her disapproval, but didn't object vocally.

"Well, we've got a big day ahead of us. For at least Mira and I, so we better go to sleep now," Jump mewed, sounding rather tired.

"Yeah, goodnight," Mira mewed, her voice muffled as if she was curled down with her tail in front of her muzzle.

"G'night," Scorch mumbled from her half-asleep state. She rolled on her back as she heard Jump and Mira fall asleep, their breaths deepening in rhythm. Opening her eyes slightly, she stared through slits at the black sky that was scattered with chips of brilliant light.

"What are those?" Scorch asked curiously, having not really been told what those specks of light were.

"Stars, though some cats believe that every star is a cat that used to live and went to sleep in the sky," Painted's hushed voice answered her.

"Do you believe that?" Scorch asked, entranced by the idea of cats with stars in their fur and eyes. The wind whistled over them lightly, waving the grass and reeds from side to side.

"Hmm... maybe, it's a pretty thought. But I have no reason to," Painted mewed quietly, sounding oddly thoughtful and unsure.

"I think it's true... just sounds right," Scorch mumbled, falling back to sleep.

Painted snorted gently. "It does sound right, doesn't it?"

...

"Well, we're off, try to stay out of trouble," Mira mewed to them next morning as she and Jump headed off.

"No problem," Scorch mumbled, still half asleep as the two cats left the makeshift nest.

"Why are you sleeping so long?" Painted asked, prodding her with a paw.

"I'm not! The sun isn't even awake yet, so I don't need to wake up yet," Scorch defended herself, still stubbornly keeping her eyes closed.

"Well if you do that, then we'll be late," Painted mewed.

Scorch pricked her ears. "But we aren't doing anything today!" Finally opening her eyes, she stared at Painted in confusion.

"Sure we are, we just aren't going into the city," Painted mewed. Scorch frowned, Painted sounded tense, nostalgic, and tired. But for some reason, there was something that Painted felt she needed to visit.

"Where are we going?" she asked curiously, sitting up and trying to feel out the emotions in Painted's words.

"You'll see. But for now, let's go catch something to eat," Painted mewed, walking off without giving away much.

Scorch scowled for a second, than scampered off to find food in high spirits. *Oh! There's something!* Spotting a small brown creature between the reeds, she crouched, circling around to make sure she was downwind, and started stalking the creature.

"*Crunch*!" She stiffened as she pushed by and snapped a dry reed

with a loud snap. Before she could react, the prey had vanished and she was left with nothing. *How do cats hunt?! Either it's too open or too crowded! I'll never get it right.*

Shaking off her disappointed feelings, she continued to search for food, but could find only one mouse that spotted her at the same time she spotted it. Returning back to the sleeping site with a feeling of heavy disappointment and aching paws, she spotted Painted already there and digging into a large mouse.

"So you didn't catch anything, huh?" Painted asked, lifting her eyes from above her meal.

Scorch shook her head dejectedly, wincing in embarrassment as her belly rumbled. "I'll find something later," she mewed in determined optimism. *Surely I'll find something while we walk to wherever Painted wants to go!*

"Don't bother, I caught extra, but I'm not that hungry. Eat it or it'll attract unwelcome guests," Painted mewed nonchalantly, shoving a smaller mouse toward her.

"Thank you!" Scorch exclaimed, feeling herself relax with relief that she wouldn't have to travel on an empty belly. Although Painted said she'd caught extra for herself, Scorch knew she'd done it just in case she didn't come back with anything.

"Yeah, well, don't get used to it. If you don't get better fast, you will be going hungry. I only caught that because it was basically begging to be caught and I thought I could eat it as well," Painted grumbled, watching her eat with a frown.

"Okay! I'll try extra hard!" Scorch promised, not wanting to be a burden to the others who were already doing so much to help her go home.

"Fine, now, we better go," Painted mewed, looking at the rising sun. The cream she-cat sighed tiredly even though it was morning, and then started walking away.

"Wait for me!" Scorch called, finishing the last scraps of the mouse

before bounding after the older cat hurriedly.

They traveled away from the beach, the reeds falling away to a carpet of green grass which Scorch looked at in awe. "It's so green!" she squealed, drinking in the sight of the bright green ground. She'd only ever seen coarse green spots of grass before.

"There's no sand either!" she added, not spotting the sifting minerals.

"Most of the world doesn't have sand but grass instead, just the beaches near water do," Painted mewed, not looking at her as she continued to walk across the grassy hills.

"Hmm, the grass feels so soft! It kind of feels like moss," Scorch observed, rubbing her paws on the grass as she padded forward.

"Yeah, moss kind of looks like grass, and often grows in grassy areas where it's wet," Painted mewed.

"Wow! You know so much!" Scorch mewed in awe, wondering how far Painted had traveled.

"Oh, no, not really. I just know about the places I've been," Painted mewed.

"Hmm? What's that dark stuff over there?" Scorch asked, pointing at a dark wall in the distance.

"Those are pine trees, if you go through there a ways; you'll happen upon the Clans," Painted mewed, her voice turning harsher.

"Can we go visit them?" Scorch asked.

"Absolutely not! You don't ever want anything to do with those Clans!" Painted hissed venomously.

Scorch flinched at the current of despise Painted used. "W-what did they do?" she asked with a nervous treble.

Painted shook her head, "You ask too many questions, but they are what drove Mira, Jump, and I from our homes. And as a result of

that..." Painted swallowed hard.

"Your family was killed?" Scorch asked in a small voice, looking at her paws.

Painted gave a jerk of her head in affirmation. Then moved forward more quickly, forcing Scorch to jog to keep up with Painted's long strides. "Why'd they make you leave?" Scorch asked, but her question went unanswered as Painted ignored her with a tight mouth.

Scorch sighed. She loved Painted, but the cat was so difficult! She just closed herself off whenever she was asked something she didn't want to hear. *But I guess... I wouldn't want to talk about my parents if they died, and be reminded of them...*

Suddenly Scorch felt bad for forcing Painted to think about such an unpleasant memory. She wouldn't want her parents to spend every waking moment thinking she was dead, and she didn't want to think about not seeing them again for a long time.

She fell silent, thinking about how to approach Painted's past more pleasantly. She thought for a moment before finding a solution. "So, what were your kits like?" she asked in quiet curiosity.

Painted took a deep breath, letting it out in a trembling laugh. "They were troublemakers, the both of them. They followed after their father in that aspect. But they were the sweetest little things when it came to show," Painted mewed in quiet fondness, longing evident in her voice.

Scorch gave a small smile, glad that Painted could at least think of her kits in such a way. "They died far too young," Painted continued with a crack in her voice and Scorch gave a sympathetic glance to the cream she-cat. *She lost so much... so soon.*

Did her parents feel the same? The thought horrified her; she didn't want them to think of her with such sadness and dismal longing. *The best thing I can do is get back as fast as I can!* She steadied her thoughts on that, it wasn't just for her that she was going home, it was for her parents as well and she couldn't stop no matter what.

"We're almost there, to that place..." Painted murmured, more to herself then to Scorch. So Scorch didn't respond as she followed the reminiscing she-cat as quietly as she could. *I get the feeling... that this must be something that has to do with Painted's past.*

They crested one of the taller hills, and Scorch looked down at the peaceful appearance. A small green hollow with a small red-leaved tree, the branches curving out to give a round top and a screen most of the way down to the ground. The whole tree was probably two cats high and three cats wide, a perfect place for a nest.

In addition, there was a tiny spring bubbling up between two rocks that caught Scorch's attention instantly. "There's water coming up from the ground!" she mewed excitedly, pointing at the spring with her tail. She also noticed a row of three small piles of rocks.

"Yes... it's the clearest water I've ever tasted," Painted murmured, eyes unfocused as she lost herself in her thoughts.

"Have you... been here before?" Scorch asked hesitantly, wondering how Painted would react to being interrupted in her thoughts.

Painted shook herself roughly after a moment, "Yes, I used to live here. Nice place, isn't it?" Painted gazed into the hollow with a fond look, but also with a dark shadow in her eyes that Scorch didn't really understand. *Oh... wait.*

"This is the place you wanted to go to?" Scorch asked, glancing at the hollow again.

"Yes... I wanted to visit my old home once more," Painted sighed, then walked forward down the slope.

Scorch followed the cream spotted cat down; unsure of why Painted would want to come back here if her hunch was correct. "Is this the home the Clans drove you out of?" she asked, eyeing the tree-den.

"No, this is where we settled for a while after that," Painted mewed, sounding tense again.

Scorch fell silent, looking up at the sun that sat directly above them. *Its sun-high, it took half the day to get here*. Scorch was reminded of

her thirst and went to lap at the water in the spring; the spring water bubbled up in the air about three whiskers length, and then fell down into the little pool between the rocks. But Painted was right, it was clearer and sweeter than any rainwater she'd tasted.

"Why doesn't it overflow?" Scorch asked, staring at the bubbling water curiously.

"I assume the water in the rock leaks out back into the ground," Painted mewed.

Scorch nodded, "That sounds about right," she mewed, dabbing her black paw in the water for a while. "So... why did you really want to come back here?" Scorch asked straightforward.

"You never were subtle," Painted grumbled.

"No cat would travel half a day just to see an old den," Scorch continued. "So what's here that is so important?" Scorch looked over her shoulder at Painted.

The cream she-cat's bright green gaze was focused on the ground, but she stole a quick glance at the row of rock piles and Scorch noticed. "Are those the graves of your family?" finding no other purpose a mark of rocks might serve.

Painted stared at the graves and nodded slowly. "But I guess I don't know what to do now that I'm back here, in my old haunts," Painted murmured.

Scorch opened her mouth to suggest something, but Painted got up abruptly and walked off without a word. *Where is she going?* Scorch considered going after her, but guessed Painted needed some time alone. *This situation is so difficult... I don't know what to do.*

Scorch got up and went over to the graves, looking them up and down. Two were smaller, probably belonging to the kits, and the third was larger. *I wish you three could be here to make Painted happy*... She looked at the dull gray and brown stones, washed clean by countless rain showers, but still dark and giving off a dreary feeling.

Death shouldn't have to be so sad... Scorch frowned and walked out of the hollow, nearing an area where she'd noticed a patch of bright yellow flowers. She picked them until they filled her jaws and then she returned to the graves.

Carefully, as to not disrupt the sleeping stones, she placed the bundles of flowers she made on the graves, gently but firmly placing them in the rocks so that they wouldn't blow away with the breeze. *There... now they look happier*.

She tilted her head to the side, eyeing the splash of yellow on the graves. It wasn't that much color, but it gave a more cheerful and warm outlook mixed in with the solemn look of the stone. "That looks nice," Painted's quiet voice startled her. And she turned to see the tall she-cat coming down the slope on the other side of the hollow.

Scorch nodded solemnly, feeling it was the wrong time to say anything as she turned back to look at the graves, wondering about life and death and how it was connected. "It's odd, isn't it? How life can just end, just stop so suddenly," Scorch murmured.

"Life always ends, everything does." Painted sat down beside her and stared at the graves with her.

"But does it really just end? I think cats really do go to the stars when they die, and one day, we'll see every cat that died once more," Scorch mewed softly.

"I hope so," Painted mewed, a hint of desperateness in her tone. She wanted so bad to see her family again, Scorch could feel it.

"We'd better get moving back though, huh?" Scorch mewed.

"Yes," Painted sighed, pulling herself to her paws while Scorch did the same. "Goodbye, Foggy, Sky, Star," Painted listed the names as she touched each grave with her nose.

They traveled back to the nest in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Scorch was still wondering what happened after death, or if it really was just the absolute end. Somehow, she couldn't

convince herself to believe that she just stopped being after death. But then, what happened after death? *I suppose I'll have to find out someday.*

By the time they were back at the nest, the sun was setting, Scorch was exhausted, and Mira and Jump had already returned. "Where did you two go?" Jump asked from where he was munching on a bird. A few other pieces of fresh-kill sat in the hollow and Scorch was glad she didn't have to try to hunt for her meal this evening.

Scorch glanced at Painted; it wasn't for her to answer that. "We just went on a walk, it was boring waiting for you," Painted mewed, wearing that calm, apathetic look again.

"Well, I hope you had a more pleasant day then we did, we looked everywhere, but I could only find my mother. And she didn't know where the heck any of my littermates are," Jump mewed in agitation.

"What about your father?" Scorch asked, pulling a mouse from the pile.

"I never knew him in the first place, and I honestly don't care," Jump snorted, tearing a wing from the bird.

"Well, it wasn't so bad. I ran into my old friend, Maple, and she updated me on some things that were going on," Mira mewed.

"Like?" Painted inquired.

"Like how the Clans have stopped visiting the city recently, though every once in a while some of the former city cats come back and look for recruits, mostly young cats," Mira mewed.

"That it?" Painted yawned.

"No, it seems that the side the City cats joined on won in the fight in the Clans," Mira mewed.

"How is that our problem?" Painted shook her head.

"It isn't, as long as we don't hang out around here too long," Mira

mewed.

"Well good, cause we're leaving tomorrow as-" Painted broke off, pricking her ears and looking in the direction they'd come from.

"What is it?" Scorch mumbled quietly through a mouth-full of mouse.

"Did you hear that?" Painted whispered.

"Yeah," Jump growled softly, getting to his paws and stepping in front of his mate who had her large ears pricked high.

"The wind is blowing our scent right toward whatever it is," Mira observed. "Scorch, get back."

Scorch obeyed quickly, but her claws unsheathed anyways, if she needed to fight, she'd fight. "Wait..." Scorch paused, a sharp scent pricking her nose that smelled familiar and made her wounds ache. "Whatever it is, is injured," she mewed.

"Makes it easier," Jump grumbled.

"No... it's a kit!" Painted exclaimed.

"Another one?" Jump groaned and Scorch fluffed up her fur defensively as he gave her a glance.

Painted used her paw to part a section of the reeds and there, indeed, stood an injured kit. The kit stumbled weakly, covered in long gashes and deep bites and streaked with blood. "Oh no!" Scorch hurried toward the other kit instinctively.

The kit raised her big, blue eyes to them with a silent plead. "Please just leave me be..." the strange kit gave a shuddering breath and slumped to the ground.

Chapter 7: Wrong Is Right

Chapter 7: Wrong Is Right

"Who is that kit?" Mira asked to no one in particular as they stared at the still unconscious kit. After the kit had collapsed, they'd done their best to clean and bandage her wounds, using Scorch's slightly advanced herb knowledge to use marigold juices and cobwebs to bind the worst wounds.

"She has an odd scent," Scorch mewed, twitching her nose. The kit had her own particular scent, but it was overlaid by another scent, as if it was a cumulative scent. Scorch frowned, feeling an odd sensation that this kit was more than just an unlucky victim.

"I agree, I'd almost suggest she was a Clan-kit, the way she smells like she's from some large group of cats. But from what I know, Clan cats take excellent care of their kits, one of the few things they do right," Painted sniffed in disdain.

"We'll just have to wait until she wakes up," Jump decided. "But we should go to sleep ourselves, it's getting late," he mewed, looking up at the blackening sky where the brighter stars were already shining clearly.

"Okay..." Scorch mewed, muffling her yawn. "We'll just have to wait..."

... Kit's POV...

She opened her eyes, wondering if she was dead yet. But to her surprise, she found herself lying on a comfortably soft green lining. *What in the world...?* Memories of the day before crammed into her head, making her shut her eyes tight and clench her mouth to try to ignore the painful past days.

But... where am I? She didn't remember what had happened after she'd dragged herself away, her young life bleeding out and leaving

a trail behind her. She'd just desired the pain to go away and to be all alone. *Alone*.

It was a word she'd learned to love in her short five moons of life. Being alone forever, it was an odd desire, but it was hers. And with her experience with other cats, who could really blame her? But for now, she had to focus on where she was and what had happened.

She looked around, craning her neck slightly. She could smell several other cats, but she was turned away from them, her head facing a tall wall of coarse grass and dry, brown reeds. She looked over her fur, wondering what had happened to stop the painful throbbing of her wounds.

Her eyes widened in amazement as she saw her wounds bound expertly with cobwebs, just as skillfully as Skypool. *But who did it?* Groaning slightly at her wounds that ached as she moved, she sat up, panting and hanging her head as her body tensed and relaxed as she finished moving.

Now, finally, she looked up at the sky, trying to collect her surroundings. The pale yellow light told her the sun was just barely starting to rise, and most of the area was in gray shadows. But she worked up the courage and turned to look at her unwanted saviors.

Her mouth hung open as she looked at the four cats lying strewn about. *I owe my life to... rouges?!* Two, a tom and a she-cat, were sleeping together. One was a small, dirty-white tom with frayed whiskers as if he never cleaned himself, and he had a raggedly torn ear.

The she-cat he was sleeping with was a smallish gray tabby she-cat who looked like a kittypet with her soft looking fur. The other grown cat was a long-legged cream she-cat with white, black, and orange spots along with white paws, ear–tips, and tail-tip.

But it was the last cat that really shocked her. The one closest to her; a tiny, shaded red-orange mottled she-kit with a black paw, opposite black spot over her eye, and a black ear the same side of her black paw. But that wasn't it, this she-kit's fur stuck up in wild angles as if she'd been rubbed the wrong way. *This kit has a different*

scent then the others though...

She looked around, wondering if she should just take off on her own while they were all sleeping. She may just be a kit, but she still had enough pride to not let it be known she'd been helped by rouges. She looked around, wondering which way to go and thinking she should go quickly before these cats woke up.

Although they'd helped her, that didn't necessarily mean they were friendly. And just because she was a little thankful they had helped her, it didn't mean she wanted to have anything to do with them. With that in mind, she turned, ready to set off.

"Are you feeling better?" she fell back as the tiny red kit suddenly appeared in front of her, blinking enormous black eyes at her. The kit's heart jumped to her throat as she stumbled to get back to her paws, thinking how much this kit looked like a wild animal popping out of nowhere.

"I-I'm just fine," the kit stumbled, perplexed at the odd accent this kit had. Though, it had a tone to it that made it sound familiar.

"That's good," the kit purred, her accent sharpening and slurring on alternate sounds.

"Who are you?" she asked, staring warily at the tiny kit. She wasn't scared by this cat, even injured; she could still defeat this tiny kit.

"I'm Scorch!" the kit mewed proudly, her eyes narrowing and staring at her closely.

She shrunk away from the kit's black stare, feeling as if she was being scrutinized and every thought and emotion was forfeit. *Who is this kit?!* "W-who took care of my wounds?" she asked, desperate to distract this kit.

"I did!" the kit called, 'Scorch,' answered cheerily, grinning and showing her fangs.

She glared at Scorch, "Don't lie to me; you can't be more than three moons old, there's no way you would be able to do this."

Scorch frowned, looking confused but not insulted. "I'm four moons old! Why does every cat think I'm so young...? And my mother taught me about some herbs! Not all of them, but some of them," the red kit mewed, sounding oddly convincing.

"Hmm," she hummed and backed away, looking around to see if the older cats had woken up. She could still get away pretty clearly if she knocked this kit out. Although she still cringed from harming the one who had saved her life.

"You want to leave, why not just say so?" Scorch suddenly asked, startling her to wits end.

With her eyes wide in shock, she stared at the kit who had just read her mind. *I never said anything to indicate I was leaving, did I?* "How do you know if that's what I was going to do?" she tested the kit.

Scorch shrugged, "I don't know, I could just tell that you wanted to get away. Who are you, anyways?"

She stared in perplexity at this kit. Scorch was small, but she sure had a way of making her stumble over her thoughts. And she did it so... *innocently*. Suspicion crowded her thoughts as she stared at the kit. "Why should I tell you who I am?" she answered.

Scorch tilted her head to one side, not looking offended or annoyed in the slightest. "Well, because I told you who I am!" came the cheerful answer.

"I didn't ask you," she mewed.

"Yes, you did! You must have a really bad memory," Scorch sighed, frowning. "Well, then I'll just have to give you a name!" Scorch continued, looking at her carefully. "You look like your name should be... Moon."

She nearly fell over at Scorch's choice of a name for her, feeling more than freaked out by this strange kit. "W-what makes you think my name should be Moon?"

"Well, your fur is really dark gray like the dark side of the moon,

and your eyes are bright like stars. But I don't like the name, 'Night,' and , 'Star,' is the name of one of Painted's dead kits, so, 'Moon,' is the only thing left in the night sky!" Scorch gave the long explanation.

"Who's Painted?" 'Moon,' asked, not even trying to remember all of the explanation.

"The cream she-cat with the dots, but don't mention it, she doesn't like it," Scorch warned in a hushed whisper.

"Uh-huh," she mewed, feeling lost in her words and thoughts. This kit was so... open! But at the same time, she seemed wreathed in secrets. "Actually, my real name is Moonkit..." she admitted, and then berating herself for giving in to answer the kit's question.

"Oh, wow! What a coincidence! Huh?" Scorch giggled and Moonkit wondered how she was so quickly making her lose her cold, suspicious nature.

"Moon*kit*?" said kit spun around in hostility to look at the three older cats staring, or more exactly glaring, at them.

"What does that mean?" Scorch asked her friends innocently enough.

"It means she's a Clan cat, and we want nothing to do with her," Painted snarled.

... Scorch's POV ...

Scorch tilted her head to one side as she watched the scene unfold in front of her. Jump and Painted were staring at the kit, or Moonkit, specifically, hatefully while Mira looked conflicted. Scorch focused on the emotions of the other cats, slightly unnerved by their abrupt anger toward Moonkit.

Painted radiated with the most anger and hate, almost trembling with the pressure of her emotions; but Scorch detected that it wasn't aimed so much at the kit as the Clans the kit was from. Jump was in deep suspicion and disdain, while Mira wavered between fearful wariness and compassion.

Then Scorch looked at Moonkit who had backed away from the three older cats. Moonkit was squirming in fear that she was trying to crush with defiance. *The Clans are indirectly responsible for the death of Painted's family and directly responsible for them all in being driven from their homes.*

"Moonkit? Why is a Clan kit so far out here?" she asked, remembering how far she and Painted had travelled just to see the edge of a forest the Clan cats dwelled somewhere in.

Moonkit flinched at the question, the taller kit looking at her sharply with those ice-colored blue eyes. "Doesn't matter," Moonkit muttered.

"Then I think it's time for you to leave," Painted growled.

Scorch felt a fleck of irritation; could Painted not see this kit was seriously injured?! She couldn't travel so far on her own. "Are you okay to walk?" Mira asked gently, and Scorch was glad that at least one other cat could be compassionate.

"I'm fine," Moonkit insisted stubbornly.

Scorch narrowed her eyes; Moonkit was just going to make the situation worse if she pretended she was fine when she really wasn't. "No, you're not," Scorch huffed, walking over to the smoky black she-kit and nosing at her wounds.

Moonkit winced as her wounds were touched. "See? Now, where are you going?" Scorch asked, looking seriously at the kit while Painted and Jump growled their disquiet in the background.

"Err," Moonkit frowned and looked away.

"Okay, what were you running away from?" Scorch asked, sensing Moonkit's embarrassment and guilt.

"I wasn't running away!" Moonkit spat angrily.

"Well, then what *are* you doing here?" Scorch asked, narrowing her eyes slightly and losing a bit of her usual cheerfulness.

Moonkit scowled, "I just want to be alone."

"Good, we need to get moving anyways," Painted snapped. "Let's go," she nodded at the other cats but Scorch didn't move a muscle. She'd sensed it, the intense helplessness in the tone that told her that Moonkit had given up on something... other cats?

"Do you need to get back home?" Scorch asked softly.

"N-no... I don't want to go back," Moonkit mewed hoarsely, as if she was trying not to cry.

"Where are you going to go then? Wouldn't it just be better to go back until you can leave and take care of yourself?" Scorch pressed. She wouldn't be able to forgive herself if she left a fellow kit out here all alone.

Moonkit didn't answer for a few long moments, hanging her head for a moment. "Okay... I guess I probably couldn't take care of myself, huh?" Moonkit gave a small, disappointed laugh.

"Okay! Then since you're injured, I'll escort you back!" Scorch announced cheerfully, ready for Painted's and Jump's angry protests.

"What?!" Painted snarled.

"No way! We're already on a mission to get you home!" Jump mewed angrily.

Scorch gave a slight pout, tilting her head up and looking over her shoulder to look at them with her big eyes. "This is just a little detour. We can't just let her go alone! Besides, you came with me to keep me safe, and I'm going with Moonkit back to her home, so if you want to keep me safe, you have to come with me."

Jump stared at her, his lips twitching to pull up in a snarl. Mira burst out laughing and nudged her mate before padding to stand over Scorch. "Okay, I'm coming," Mira laughed, amber eyes gleaming in amusement.

Scorch grinned up at Mira, glad that at least one grown cat would

be coming with them. "Well, let's head off then!" Scorch mewed, marching off in the direction Painted had taken her yesterday.

Mira laughed and followed while Moonkit moved stiffly to her side, but keeping about a tail-length away from her and Mira. Scorch stifled her annoyance in a burst of excitement at the thought of going on a new adventure.

"Looks like we have some tag-alongs," Mira giggled into her ear. Scorch laughed and looked over her shoulder, watching Jump and Painted follow at a distance, a grudgingly acceptant aurora hung around them as they stomped after them.

They continued walking, stopping to hunt when they came to the grassy fields again. Scorch was bursting with pride when she came back with a small shrew. It was young and had seemed to have some sort of injury that had made catching it easier, but she had still caught it!

Painted and Jump eventually caught up with them, but still trailed behind, complaining every chance they got. Scorch laughed at how immature they sounded and she and Mira joked about their grumpy nature. "There's the pine forest!" Scorch pointed out in excitement as the dark, hazy outline appeared.

"So this goes to ShadowClan's territory?" Moonkit asked, Scorch looked at her in surprise, the dark furred kit hadn't talked the entire way.

"I dunno," Scorch mewed, shrugging her tiny shoulders. "But... I think my mother told me my father used to be ShadowClan!" Scorch laughed, grinning.

Moonkit jumped in shock and stared at her with wide eyes. "You're a Clan cat?"

Scorch looked at Moonkit with a hint of scorn. "No, my father just used to be a Clan cat, that's it," she sighed, what had she said that made her sound like a Clan cat?

"So you're half-Clan?" Moonkit asked.

Scorch didn't know what that meant and just shrugged, "I don't know, I've never been to the Clans before, and my mother isn't a Clan cat," Scorch mewed.

Moonkit nodded, "That's a half-Clan cat," then they fell silent as they entered the pine forest. Scorch shivered, feeling a sudden chill without the sun on her back. The dark, silent forest unnerved her and she jumped and pressed against Mira as they ventured deeper in the shadow clad forest.

"What's that weird scent?" she asked, breathing in the sap-filled and swampy-fish scent. It reminded her a bit of her father.

"That's the Shadow-River border, though it used to be just ShadowClan's border," Moonkit mewed in a hushed whisper.

"Oh? Which Clan do you belong to?" Mira asked.

"ThunderClan, though now it's the Thunder-Wind Clan," Moonkit growled.

"Why did it change?" Scorch asked.

"Because Nightwing and Pinefur took over; they were allies for a while, but now they're enemies, each with two Clans and their own cats under them. Both of them are trying to drive the other out and take control of all four Clans," Moonkit whispered as they turned along the border, not crossing it but not straying from it.

"So... we can follow this border to your border?" Scorch asked, not really understanding what Moonkit had just told her.

"Yeah, you don't ever want to get caught by Shadow-River warriors," Moonkit shivered and Scorch saw the real fear in her pale blue eyes.

"Are they the ones that hurt you?" Scorch asked.

"Yes... but I was in my own territory! They just grabbed me and beat me up for entertainment," Moonkit mewed with trembling bitterness and desperateness.

Scorch's heart tugged for Moonkit. She padded over and leaned her head on Moonkit's shoulder, feeling her stiffen and then relax before shrugging her off. "Thanks..." Scorch's ears picked up the low mutter. She nodded and grinned, trying to lighten Moonkit's frown.

"Well, here we are," Moonkit sighed as they came to a new scent. A scent of rabbit and leaves, Scorch preferred the leafy smell in it that matched Moonkit's overlaid scent.

Scorch hesitated, not ready to say goodbye yet. "Maybe we'll see each other around?" Scorch mewed, looking up at the orange tinted sky; it was almost dusk.

"No, we won't, we'll be heading back to the beach," Painted growled, her fur was standing up on her shoulders and her uneasiness was more than obvious.

"Well, goodbye then, stay safe," Scorch mewed quietly, turning toward Moonkit.

"Yeah, you too, and, uh.... Thanks," Moonkit mumbled, then hurried off.

Scorch turned away and got a strong premonition as she shivered for a moment. "Something wrong?" Mira asked.

"Err, no, actually. I just got a weird feeling," Scorch frowned, looking back at the grassy area Moonkit had hurried off into. "Strange..." It just felt so wrong to turn away, *but I have to go back to my parents, right? That's the right thing for everyone, right?*

Chapter 8: Price to Pay

A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting chapters, I've been busy.

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Chapter 8: Price to Pay

"Now, tomorrow we can leave this place and pretend this never happened," Painted mewed in a harshly cheerful voice. Scorch snorted, finding Painted's failing attempt at cheerfulness amusing.

"What are you laughing about? It's your fault we wasted a whole day! And we're going to have to spend more time tomorrow travelling back!" Jump mewed crossly.

Scorch just waved her tail, "At least we won't have to worry about Clan-cats travelling after that kit and bumping into us!" she mewed happily, trying to cover the unnerving feeling in her belly that something was wrong.

"If they treated that kit so poorly, I don't think they'd go so far to find her," Painted huffed angrily.

Scorch shrugged, jumping around their makeshift nest. They were still in the pine forest, the light dim even though dusk had just started to fade. "At least there's tons of prey in these woods!" Scorch mewed happily, looking at the leftovers they'd collected.

She had even been able to catch her own prey, though she accredited it to the thick layer of pine needles that muffled sound and the fact that her shaded pelt was less obvious in the shadowed forest then on open green slopes.

"Well, I think some cat should stand guard tonight, since we're so close to Clan territory," Jump growled, his sharp green eyes were continuously flickering around. Every cat, except for her, was on edge in the shadowy forest.

Scorch wondered whether it was due to the different landscape, or the fact the Clans were close enough to pick up their scents if they really tried. She guessed it was due to both as she settled down on the outskirts of the holly covered hollow.

It was hardly shelter, the holly bush sparse in leaves and allowing her to see through it to the darker pine covered sky. But it was the only hollow they'd found that was really dry and didn't smell like a swamp.

"Scorch, settle down," Mira soothed.

Scorch realized she was quivering in excitement. "Sorry," she whispered, realizing she was rustling the holly bush and was probably keeping the other cats awake.

As they fell asleep, with Jump sitting guard outside the den, Scorch peered through the darkness, no difference between her eyes closed and open. She thought she must have fallen asleep, for when she awoke, misty silver shadows wreathed and folded around the pressing blackness.

No thoughts came to her head, nothing spoke to her in her heart, but she got to her paws and slipped out of the den, hardly registering that Jump had fallen asleep on guard. Soundless, listless, she moved forward, her pelt drenched in the black shadows even as she stepped through the silver light.

The wind howled, an owl hooted, but nothing moved before her staring eyes. She didn't know where she was going; no senses broke through to her still sleeping mind. *Sleeping.* The back of her mind started to come to the conclusion that she must be asleep.

Through the forest she moved, and as she crossed the border which she both recognized and ignored as the ShadowClan border, things started to move. Shapes, cat shapes, with coats as black as night to pelts brighter white than the moonlight.

They moved around her, flowing like water around a small stone. Sounds, voices, and words in all matter of emotions wreathed around her unhearing ears. *Memories of the land...* The thought, the

first one to break through her thoughtless observing, shifted through her mind, being heard and thought of at all angles.

Song, she saw the black cat, her amber eyes glowing at her. She blinked when she saw four more cats step up beside Song, two on each side. Scorch walked toward them; the silver light of the moon illuminated them from behind, blending all their fur to black.

"These cats... they are ShadowClan cats," Scorch mewed in a light whisper.

"Yes," one of the cats, a tom, stepped forward. Scorch still couldn't see his fur color, but his dark hazel eyes were bright with hope as he looked at her. "They are my cats, cats that I now live with, in the stars," he mewed; the accent sparked an image of her father to her mind.

"My father's cats..." Scorch mewed in the same distant, faraway voice.

"Yes, Scorch, do you know why you're here?" Song stepped forward now.

"No, but you want to ask something of me," Scorch stated without thinking. She didn't even know what she was saying; the words just tumbled out of her mouth.

"No, there is nothing I want you to do, the Clans will save themselves, a ripple just needs to get them moving, and then the wave that is created will sweep them clean," the tom that had stepped forward spoke.

Scorch's thoughts about the matter were buried deeper and deeper in her mind. She wasn't thinking, she wasn't reacting, she wasn't even sure if she was real. She gave out a long, low sigh, closing her eyes against a wave of dizziness.

"Scorch!" that was real; it was a real, hard voice that she really heard with her real ears. Her eyes opened again, this time there were no cats around her, no odd silver light flowing through the forest. The perfect blackness blinded her and she shook her head,

trying to recollect what had just happened as she wondered where she was.

I was in the forest... there were cats, Clan cats, and Song, and sounds.... My mirages returned, but it felt so much stronger! They were talking to me and they wanted me to do something... but what was it?!

She couldn't think about that because now Painted had her by her scruff and was shaking her around roughly. "What the heck are you doing wandering into Clan territory in the middle of the night?!" *So I really was awake, or, something close to that. And I really was in the forest.*

Scorch blinked up at her, only seeing the flash of Painted's bright green eyes. "I dunno... I don't remember," she answered honestly, looking around the dark forest with wide eyes.

Painted sighed loudly, "I don't know what's wrong with you..." then she grabbed her and headed off at a brisk pace through the shadowed forest.

Bits and pieces of what had happened came to Scorch as they headed back; she recalled quite sharply the stars that had glimmered on the fur of the cats that had stood by Song, and the ice fire in their eyes. *That tom cat... told me not to help the Clans? I wasn't planning on it.*

Scorch frowned, had she been thinking of helping the Clans? No, maybe making sure Moonkit was alright, but that didn't matter much to her. And she didn't even know the first thing about what was going on here! Besides knowing everything was scotched up in the worst way.

"Did you hear that?" Painted whispered, stopping suddenly.

"Nuh-uh, you're imagining things," Scorch yawned from where she hung from Painted's grasp. She hadn't heard anything, but she'd also been enveloped in her thoughts. "Just keep going and we'll be fine," Scorch mumbled, snuggling against Painted's warm chest.

"Don't get too comfy," Painted growled, giving her a sharp shake

that made a whine emit past her lips.

Scorch pretended to pout for a few moments as Painted hurried along. She wasn't really annoyed, and knew Painted was just on edge from being in Clan territory. Instead she focused her senses on her surroundings, since her eyes were mostly useless in the peerless blackness.

"Everything smells the same," Scorch grumbled, breathing in the heavy sap-scented air. The rotting marshy smell tinged the air too, but it wasn't overwhelming.

"Clan cat's scents change to blend in with the territory around them, so then they can live in the same territory as their prey more easily," Painted muttered.

Scorch nodded and fell silent again as they continued travelling through the overwhelming blackness. "How can you see where you're going?" Scorch asked. She could hardly make out Painted's bright white paws that were only two mouse lengths away from her.

"I'm just following my previous scent trail," Painted mumbled.

Then they fell silent again, until they crossed the Clan border and Painted relaxed and slowed her pace. "There, we're in the clear," Painted sighed.

"Too bad I can't remember what happened," Scorch yawned.

"Too bad you went in there in the first place!" Painted growled angrily, stomping forward.

When they reached their den, Scorch squirmed out of Painted's grip and dashed into the den, curling down and closing her eyes. She heard Painted enter the den with an annoyed snort before she curled back down.

But Scorch didn't fall back asleep, now that her eyes were closed; she seemed to see everything that had happened replaying behind her closed eyelids. *So that's what happened....* She remembered, wondering momentarily why she hadn't been able to remember

until her eyes were closed. *Not that the mirages themselves make any sense.*

But the image of the four cats with Song stuck in her mind as she drifted into sleep. *They're important... they need something. But if I can't give it to them, then why come to me?*

...

The next morning dawned gray and cold, an odd chill ran through the breeze that struck at Scorch's bones and made her shiver. "Looks like leaf-fall decided to make an appearance," Jump grumbled as they stood outside the den.

The pine trees waved wildly above them and the sound of them crashing against each other filled the air. Through the torn gaps made by the waving pine trees, a turbulent and swirled gray sky showed above, blocking out the yellow sunlight and keeping them in early morning gray.

"Why's it so cold?" Scorch shivered, pressing against Mira's warm gray fur.

"Actually, for so late in the season, this is still warmer than usual," Painted observed.

"I hope that means there won't be much snow this year, makes hunting a whole lot easier," Jump grumbled, sharp green eyes scanning the covered sky.

"What are you talking about?" Mira laughed, swatting her tail at her mate. "You love hunting in the snow! You blend right in!" Mira giggled, looking at the mock annoyed face on her mate.

"Yeah, and then my paws are so cold, I can't tell them apart from the snow!" Jump retorted with a rare, goofy smile.

Mira laughed and nudged her mate, leaving Scorch's side to be by her mate and leaving Scorch shivering in the cold wind. "Let's hunt and then get out of here, the sooner we're gone the better," Painted growled, bright green eyes wide as she looked around suspiciously.

Scorch nodded, still shivering, and scampered off. She hoped a hunt would warm her up and a warm meal would help even more. Moving as quietly as she could in the windy forest, she turned her head from side to side, unable to catch any scents in the blustery weather.

Wandering around, she paused, feeling she was close to Clan territory both by instinct and scent. But there! A mouse, on the outside of the Clan border, out in the open and busy sniffling in the pine needles for food. It was almost begging her to catch it!

She told herself it was too close to Clan territory; Painted would kill her if she accidentally crossed the border again. But the mouse wasn't actually in Clan territory and her rumbling stomach and cold paws were begging her to get a move on.

I'll just catch it real quick like, I haven't even seen any Clan cats this close to the border anyways. Crouching and sliding forward like a snake, she snuck closer to the mouse. And there! She pounced, her little paws catching the mouse's tail, but it squirmed and pulled away before she could catch it with her mouth.

Unwilling to lose her meal, she chased it a few steps forward and pounced again, her paws landing a bit sloppily, but still on, the mouse and she quickly bit its neck with her jaws and picked it up, sighing in relief that she'd been able to catch her first sight of prey. *I'm getting better at this!* She thought happily.

"Well, well, well, a trespassing kit with prey?" Scorch jumped in her skin, spinning and staring with wide eyes as three cats seemed to melt away from the shadows. With paws colder then ice and heart thumping painfully hard in her chest, Scorch looked at the three cats with wide eyes.

The leader of the group was a large black tom with one massive white paw and cold blue eyes, his lips were twitched down in a slight snarl and he looked like he was perpetually frowning, deep creases between his eyes. Behind him was a grim looking long-legged black she-cat with scars down her right eye and amber showing beneath the scars.

The last was slightly different from the other cats, a black tom with sharply pointed ears and amber eyes. He looked at her worriedly, his amber eyes holding a silent message for her. Lucky Scorch, she was very good at deciphering hidden meanings. *He's telling me to run.*

Scorch backed away slowly as the cats advanced, keeping the same distance between them at all times. She kept backing until she crossed back over the border which she guessed she must have crossed while chasing the mouse.

"Be a good kit and come here," the leader growled, he was in a sour mood, Scorch could tell, and he was willing to take it out on her. Scorch glanced at the tall she-cat; she shivered when she couldn't pick up any emotion from the stolid cat. It seemed she was just doing what she was told, without any thought about it.

But something about her... The way she moved forward imposingly with her head high, it looked familiar. A sudden image flashed in her mind, a perfect match, almost. *No way!* Now curious as well as terrified, Scorch looked back at the leader.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she defended herself as she mumbled around her prey.

"No? You caught that prey on *my* territory, didn't you? That makes it mine, and you stealing," the leading tom growled, showing his sharp fangs.

Scorch continued to back away. "Nuh-uh, it was outside your border to begin with."

"But you *caught* it in my territory?" the tom persisted in a growl.

Scorch felt a flash of irritation, all this nonsense about the prey was irking her. "Even if I did give you the prey you'd still attack me because you're just *mean*!" she burst out.

That made the tom pause, surprised at her sudden statement. She took her chance and ran, the three other cats coming after her in a hesitated run. Scorch didn't know where she was running too, but

she was just running, like when she'd been running from the fox.

Why can't I fight?! Helplessness at her small size made her frown as she ran, her cold paws darting as fast as they could, she tried not to focus on the cats that were steadily gaining on her until...

"Got you," Scorch gave a cry of pain as her scruff was grabbed between sharp, digging teeth and she was pulled off the ground. She was shaken harshly until she dropped the mouse and her teeth clacked together, biting her tongue in the process.

She rolled her eyes up, seeing the tall black she-cat had caught her, while the kinder looking tom pawed at the mouse limply and the leading tom glared at her. "Now, what should we do to this disrespectable kit?" he growled.

Scorch winced as the she-cat's teeth grinded against her scruff, tearing at the skin as she mulled over the tom's words. "You have a tail, don't you? You don't need that anymore," the tom cackled, his eyes lighting up at his own gruesome brilliance.

"Why don't we just kill her and get moving?" the she-cat muttered impatiently.

"What's the point in killing her if she doesn't really understand what she did wrong?" the tom growled.

"Why kill her in the first place? A small mistake shouldn't be worth a life," the other black tom muttered from where he was staring at the mouse with sad eyes.

"What was that, Crowclaw?" the leading cat snarled, jumping at the tom and cuffing him hard over the head. Scorch winced in sympathy at the hard thump. The abused tom looked at her sadly, almost apologetically, before shaking his head.

"I didn't say anything, Shale," Crowclaw answered the big tom called Shale.

"Good," Shale sneered, "Any more slipups and I'll be ordered to kill you as well as trespassers." Then the big tom turned to her and grabbed her tail, ready to go on with his plan.

Scorch bit her already bitten tongue as teeth clamped around her tail. She still looked at the tom in sympathy; to have to live with cats like these... it must be worse than death. *Death*. She suddenly remembered they'd said they were going to kill her, but she wasn't ready to die!

"Let go!" she cried, feeling the teeth dig deeper into her tail. "Let go!" she started struggling, her sudden twist of movements from what otherwise had been a calm capture, made the tall she-cat lose her grip and drop her.

Of course, now that wasn't much better since she was hanging upside down from her poor tail that was being maimed. "That hurts!" she huffed, kicking up at the tom's muzzle, one paw hitting his nose hard and she was dropped on her head as he gasped and rubbed at his sore nose with a paw.

"Look here, you little maggot!" the tom snarled. "Get her, Raven!" he barked at the tall she-cat who was staring at her with wide eyes, intelligence flowing through what had just been a blank stare.

"That accent she has... I've heard it before," the she-cat, Raven, murmured. Then she shook her head, "Never-mind, that's impossible," Raven muttered more to herself then to anyone and Scorch couldn't spend any time being confused as she tried to get away from the tall she-cat.

"Stop right there!" hope soared through Scorch as Painted leaped into the clearing, slamming against the tall black she-cat and sending them both tumbling away.

Mira and Jump appeared, stepping protectively in front of her as she turned to watch the scene unfold, her wounded tail and bitten tongue forgotten for the moment. Her eyes were drawn to the two glaring she-cats, Painted and Raven. *I was right*.

They looked like mirror reflection, same size and shape, only their colors were different. But looking closely, Raven's amber eyes matched Mira's as well. And glancing at the gray tabby, she was shivering in... outrage? She'd never seen Mira look so murderously furious.

Were they all... sisters? They were definitely kin, but something told Scorch they were more than just distant relatives. "Never thought even *you* could be so low as to believe the garbage that cat spewed," Painted snarled, green eyes glaring hatefully.

"And I never expected you to be anything better than a mangy rogue. How's your family? Not too cold in their graves?" Raven taunted Painted. Scorch winced at the sharp insult and knew Painted wasn't going to let that slide.

And she sure didn't. Painted yowled and lunged for Raven, the two of them falling into a dark and light blur as they wrestled with each other. Jump leaped at Crowclaw, who did the bare minimum to defend himself, letting himself be driven away. Looking closely, Jump seemed to pick up on that and was keeping his claws half-sheathed as he batted the black tom away.

Mira raced for the big black tom, and Scorch's chest tightened in worry as she wondered how the small, soft she-cat would fare against the big, mean tom. But she caught her breath in amazement as she saw Mira easily flitting around the massive tom, expertly avoiding his blows while landing her own with painful accuracy.

Wow! Her eyes widened in awe as she watched her friends fight so expertly. Jump had returned from sending Crowclaw away and was helping his mate drive off the gigantic Shale. They almost had him beat when he shook them away and lunged for her. Scorch jumped but he had planted his paw on her wounded tail and she cried in pain as she jerked against it.

Shale raised his massive white paw above her, "I'll finish what I started!" He hissed, blood dripping down from several wounds onto her as he brought his paw down. Scorch cringed, waiting for the devastating blow to hit. She heard the thud, the crack, but she didn't feel anything. Then she heard the scream, it wasn't hers.

She look with wide, horrified eyes to find Mira crouched above her, her leg bent awkwardly where the blow had hit. "Mira!" she cried, eyes wide, looking at the soft gray she-cat as she collapsed on her side and Jump flung himself furiously at the cat that had hurt his mate.

With Jump quickly driving Shale away, Scorch helped as best she could for Mira to lie down on her side on the ground. She started sniffing over the she-cat, anxiously trying to figure out where she'd been hit and what the damage was.

Mira had her teeth clenched tight and her eyes closed tighter, her breaths coming out in small hisses of pain. *Ah.* She found the damage, Mira's leg, just below the shoulder, had been hit, fractured, if not broken. *What power that a cat can snap a leg with one hit!* And even more horrifyingly, she knew if that blow had made contact with her head, she would indeed be dead.

Emotions of gratefulness and guilt surged through her and her lips trembled as she tried to keep back the sobs. "I'm sorry," she cried.

"Don't be, I wanted you to keep living, and if this is the price, then I'm happy to pay," Mira gave a painful smile.

"Is she okay?" Scorch turned to look at Jump and Painted, both looking worriedly at Mira. The other cats had been driven off, and she was sorry she hadn't learned the relationship between Raven and her two friends. But she didn't think about that now, Mira needed help. Mira was hurt, because of her.

"I think her leg is broken, but I know what to use to help that," Scorch mewed, racking her mind for what her mother had told her to do in case she sprained her paw, it worked just as well for broken bones.

"What can we do?" Jump asked desperately, flitting around his mate's head anxiously.

Scorch went silent for a moment as she ran through everything that needed be done to help Mira in a few moments, her mind racing in crystalline speed. "We need to build a nest around her to make her comfy, and a sort of shelter, it'd be a bad idea to move her for a few days," Scorch mewed hurriedly, getting up and pacing as she thought.

"Then we need to collect comfrey and... something to bind her leg with that will keep it secure," Scorch muttered.

"Right," Painted mewed, although she looked tired, a resolve had hardened in her eyes. "Let's get moving."

Chapter 9: Hornet's Nest

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"How's Mira doing?" Jump asked anxiously, for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. Scorch bit her lip, frowning in uncertainty. After she'd bound Mira's leg up the best she thought and Painted and Jump had made a den around them, she had started questioning her work.

Mira had fallen into unconsciousness and a fever had taken over the soft gray tabby. "I don't know," Scorch murmured in answer to Jump.

"Don't you know how to cure her?!" Jump burst out.

Scorch felt like crying. It was her fault Mira was hurt, and now she didn't even know if she was able to help her! Not to mention it was my idea to bring the kit back. *They were already doing me a favor taking me back to my parents, but now I've gotten them into one heck of a mess.*

"I'm sorry," she murmured sorrowfully, pushing the wet moss-ball she'd gotten for Mira closer to the she-cat's muzzle.

"Enough, Jump. Scorch is doing all she can," Painted mewed.

"It's her fault that Mira got hurt in the first place," Jump dared mutter under his breath and Scorch felt even worse.

Painted didn't seem to notice, or perhaps she agreed and just ignored the comment. "Now, I'm going to hunt, you two stay here and stay safe. We're still close to Clan territory, and they know where we are if they want to attack us again. But we can't move Mira right now, so just stay quiet," Painted ordered in a reserved tone.

Scorch had picked up on Painted's prickling and nervous behavior

since the fight with the Clan cats. And she couldn't get out of her mind the image of Raven and Painted, mirror reflections. Something had just rubbed Painted the wrong way in that confrontation.

Scorch watched the spotted cat turn away and walk off. "Hey, Jump?" she asked, not turning her head to look at him.

"What?" Jump snapped, fear sparked under his pelt, pressing at his thoughts. Scorch could sense it.

"Did you notice that black she-cat? How she looked like Painted?" Scorch asked.

Jump was silent for a moment. "So, you noticed, huh?" the white tom muttered.

"What is her relation to Painted and Mira?" Scorch got right to the point, still staring at where Painted had disappeared, staring more into space than at any particular spot.

Jump hesitated on a breath before sighing. "You know, that's not a mess you want to get into. And it's definitely not for me to tell you," Jump mewed in a low tone.

Scorch nodded, sighing but understanding. She'd felt the deep undercurrent of emotion that had ran through the three she-cats. It wasn't anything she could help unless her help was wanted. She knew that much.

But now she looked at Mira, frowning and thinking back to an idea she'd gotten a while ago. "Jump... you remember Moonkit?" she asked.

Jump jerked his gaze to her quickly, wary and suspicious. "What about her?" he growled in a tone that told her he was already regretting asking.

"She mentioned that medicine-cats know about healing, and she made it sound as if they're nice," Scorch mewed slowly.

"Your point?" Jump snapped, his eyes already showing his dislike

for her idea.

"If I go find Moonkit, she can probably let me to talk to the medicine-cat, and she can tell me what more I can do for Mira," Scorch explained.

"Why would Moonkit help you?" Jump asked. "No, how would you even find her?" he continued.

Scorch frowned at him. "I'm sure I could find her, and she owes us a favor after we helped her home," she mewed logically.

"It's a lot harder to find a cat in that forest then you might think. You're more likely to find the wrong cat," Jump growled.

"I can do this! I want to help Mira; you can see she's suffering!" Scorch looked at the gray tabby that was making soft groans in her unconscious state, the pain ran that deep.

Jump hesitated, his green eyes filling with sadness as he looked at his mate. *They really, really love each other*. The thought flitted through her mind briefly. "She helped me, now I have to help her," Scorch whispered.

Jump continued staring at his mate, eyes sad and fearful. Then he nodded slowly, "Go quick as you can, Painted will throw a fit if she finds out where've you gone and I'll be able to stall her for only so long," Jump mewed in a hushed tone.

Scorch nodded curtly, feeling the weight of the mission fall onto her skinny shoulders as she turned and ran toward where they'd left Moonkit the other day. *Although Mira won't die from a broken leg, the pain might keep her from eating and that makes her susceptible to illness. Not to mention if it doesn't heal right, she may never be able to walk correctly again.*

She thought of her mother, and her lame paw. She'd been told that it had frozen once and never worked again. It'd made it harder for her mother to get up and down the beach cliff. And that had only been her paw that hadn't worked. If a whole leg didn't work right, how badly would it affect that cat?

I won't let that happen! She promised herself as she gave another burst of speed, skidding to a stop and looking around nervously as she came to the Clan cat's border. Rolling in a patch of violets, she crept over the border with a cautious look around.

Even though her scent was now hidden, all she could smell was the flowers on her fur, and the thick undergrowth she slipped between didn't allow her to see very far ahead. *I hope I can find Moonkit soon!* She sped up her pace, the undergrowth growing thicker until she was crawling under and over things with every step.

She'd avoided the main paths, knowing that's where she could meet more cats like those black cats this morning. *Come to think of it... isn't it odd that all three of them were black furred?* She shrugged, coincidence maybe?

She stiffened as she heard a voice, holding her breath and slowly moving her head so that she could see where the cat was coming from. She was glad that she was currently pressed flat against the ground under a bramble bush.

"I heard a fight this morning on patrol, sounded like Nigthwing's cats caught a rogue," the speaker was a gold-brown tom with blue eyes; he spoke cheerfully, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Hmm," a silver tabby she-cat with ice blue eyes answered him with an uninterested hum.

"You Clan cats are all too depressing, right Bunny?" the golden tom gave an exaggerated sigh, nudging a bright yellow she-cat with a stub for a tail and blue eyes.

Bunny let out a giggle, "I was thinking the same thing, Thorn!"

The silver tabby muttered something, Scorch caught the words. "Wouldn't you, if you were forced under the control of a murderous maniac?" Louder she added. "Let's just get back to camp and report the patrol."

Camp?! Scorch's ears twitched. That sounded like the perfect place to look for Moonkit! She was more likely to be there than anyplace

else. *And I can follow these cats to their camp, it's almost too perfect!*

Scorch followed the cats as quickly as she could without making too much noise. She bit her tongue again as she twisted her small black paw in a little hole she hadn't seen. Pausing to test the stinging paw, she continued to follow the cats more hurriedly as they put more distance between them.

She fell on her belly as she accidentally brushed too roughly against a gorse bush, making it rustle. She tried to quiet her panting breath as she saw the silver she-cat whip her head and stare with narrowed icy eyes at where she hid. For once, she was grateful for her fur that blended in so well with the red and brown leaf-covered ground.

"Something wrong, Spirit?" Thorn paused, looking back at the she-cat that was still staring suspiciously in her direction.

The silver she-cat glared at Thorn. "It's Spiritstorm," she hissed angrily.

Thorn shrugged, "You Clan cats all have too long names, it's easier to just call you Spirit," Thorn mewed.

"Well, you are living in a Clan now," Spiritstorm, or Spirit, hissed angrily.

"Calm down, I'm sure we'll get used to it soon enough," Bunny soothed. Scorch watched curiously, *these cats seem much nicer than those that we met earlier. I wonder what's different.*

Spiritstorm grumbled, having forgotten about what she'd stopped for. The three cats pushed forward, with their tiny follower. Scorch paused as the cat scent increased dramatically, vibrations rushing to and away from her paws and ears.

We must be near the camp; I can feel a lot of cats up ahead. Now Scorch hesitated, she knew she couldn't just waltz into the camp. The encounter with those cats that morning had made her feel intense wariness for all Clan cats.

Hiding in a deep green fern bush, she watched the three cats disappear through a hole in a barrier that looked as if it was made

of bramble and gorse weaved through tight with ferns. *Maybe I can circle around, and find a hole to peek through*.

Deciding that was best, Scorch risked a quick dash across the trail to circle around the other side, for she saw the side she was on sloped upward. Skirting the barrier, she kept her ears pricked for any close paw-steps. She paused as she came to a small break in the barrier.

Bending her head, she pulled her shoulders tight and squirmed through the tiny tear. *I guess being small has its perks*. She waited until she knew she was completely immersed in the barrier, and then crept up until she could peek through into the camp.

The camp was a dirt clearing with grass and flowers growing on the outskirts. Several den looking structures stood, and opposite of her a sheer rock wall ran up, much steeper than the slope on this side, and a cave in the side of the rock wall had a trail of fallen rocks serving as a perfect pathway.

Okay, I need to find Moonkit. Dozens of cats dotted the clearing, talking, eating, playing, and all sorts of things. She spotted the three cats she'd followed back, standing and talking with a shaggy white tom who nodded at them approvingly. *Is he in charge?* He didn't look the part, with his long, ripped fur and dull yellow eyes, but he certainty held some respect within the cats.

Her eyes were drawn to several smaller cats, three kits hopped around a slightly larger cat who was tossing a moss-ball around for the kits to chase after. Scorch's tail twitched as the ball rolled around. What she wouldn't give to be able to play with them!

But you're here to find Moonkit. She reminded herself, crushing her kit urges. And she was disappointed when she didn't see Moonkit among the three kits. There was a black she-kit, a golden-brown tom, and a gray tabby tom with white paws. She thought the gray tom looked about Moonkit's size. *Her brother?*

She didn't know, but she did notice the moss-ball thrown over near her. She stiffened as the three kits raced over toward her, the moss-ball lying hardly three mouse-lengths in front of her nose. She

hurriedly backed away, but not before the gray tom pounced for the moss-ball, tripping over his paws as he landed and somersaulting head over tail right into her.

She squeaked as the tom crashed into her, pushing both of them through the barrier. The tom kit groaned as he ended up on top of her. "What did I hit?" he muttered to himself.

Scorch opened her eyes, glaring at the tom that was currently crushing her with his larger size. "Me! Now get off!" she wheezed.

"Oh gosh!" the tom kit gasped as he jumped off of her. "Are you alright?" he asked, grabbing her scruff and dragging her to her paws.

Scorch huffed and pulled away, glaring at him. *So much for not being spotted*. "I'm fine, but keep your voice down!" she hissed.

The tom kit blinked at her, not understanding. Big amber eyes stared at her, before they sparked. "Oh! Who are you? Why are you sneaking around?" he asked in bubbly curiosity.

Scorch wanted to giggle at the sudden glow in his eyes. He wasn't even concerned that she was trespassing; he just wanted to know what she was up to. But she couldn't allow herself to attract any more attention by making unnecessary noise.

"Can you help me? I need to find a Moonkit," she asked.

"My sister? She's in the den, I can bring her here!" the tom mewed hurriedly, looking around swiftly, eyes flashing.

"Can you? I'll wait right here," Scorch mewed.

The kit nodded and darted back into the barrier. *This is easy*, Scorch thought, too easy... Suddenly she had a sneaking suspicion. The tom had made her want to giggle, but her senses were telling her he wasn't particularly honest.

I can't stay here. Sneaking around, she hid in a bush where she could see her previous spot, but the heavy lilac flowers around the bush would hide her scent while the reddening leaves of the bush would

hide her pelt.

Sure enough, before her dark gaze, the tom kit appeared followed by the two kits he'd been playing with and the slightly older cat, followed last by Moonkit who looked around grumpily. *Yeah, I should have expected.*

The kits seemed to be arguing now, disappointed by the lack of the promised cat for sure. *But Moonkit is right there!* Biting her lip, she knew this was what she'd come for, she couldn't return to Jump without anything. And it was starting to get dark. *Here goes nothing, time to get into a mess.*

She stalked out, keeping to the shadows well enough that no cat spotted her until she was two tail-lengths away. "Is that your mystery kit?" the older cat asked, narrowing her blue eyes at her.

"That'd be correct," Scorch mewed, shooting the tom kit an angry glance. "But I needed Moonkit's help with something," she turned to Moonkit who was staring at her with an open-mouth.

"What the heck are you doing here?!" Moonkit asked in a strangled manner.

"Shhh!" she shushed the dark gray she-kit.

"Moonkit, how do you know this... kit?" the older cat asked calmly, but seemed at a loss for words.

"She... Remember that I was gone for a while after being attacked?" Moonkit started, the other cats nodded. "She and her friends helped me home," Moonkit muttered. "But what are you doing here?!" Moonkit turned back to her.

"I have a problem. Mira was injured badly, her leg is broken. And I need to talk to that medicine-cat you mentioned," Scorch explained herself.

Moonkit sighed and shook her head. "I knew that cat was clumsy, how did she manage to break her leg?" the kit asked scornfully.

Scorch's temper flared in defense for her friend, *Mira hadn't been*

being clumsy, and she'd done it to save her life! But this was neither the time nor place to launch into an explanation. "And what happened to your tail?" Moonkit's next question startled her.

Scorch turned to look at her tail. It was a bloody, rumpled mass where Shale had attempted to bite it off. Looking at the untreated wound, she felt the sting of the tear. "I'll take care of it later," Scorch brushed it off, it looked worse than it felt.

"Hey kit, what's your name?" the older she-cat stepped toward her, her red fur glowing in the setting sunlight, her paws and ears a paler rose-pink color.

"Scorch," she answered, feeling impatience biting at her. While she was chatting, Mira was suffering!

"I'm Leafpaw, this is Boulderkit, Ravenkit, and Gorsekit," Leafpaw introduced herself, the gray tom, the black she-kit, and the gold-brown tom kit in turn.

"Can I please just talk to the medicine-cat?" Scorch begged.

Moonkit sighed and shrugged, "I don't know why not. Skypool will be happy to help, I'm sure," and the dark gray she-kit went back through the now enlarged hole.

"You cats seem awfully willing to help," Scorch mewed suspiciously. Then she berated herself for questioning another cat's generosity, *Jump and Painted must be rubbing off on me*.

Leafpaw shrugged, "We're always looking for a chance to pull a fast one on the intruders."

"Who are the intruders exactly?" Scorch asked with a frown, feeling she was batting at a mess she couldn't afford to become a part of.

"They are rouges and loners Pinefur used to take control over ThunderClan, he also conquered WindClan. Most of them aren't half-bad, and they follow most of the traditional Clan rules. The biggest difference is that we aren't allowed to leave camp without at least one of the former rouges. And breaking the rules is punishable

by whatever Pinefur sees fit. Also, his word is law and had better be carried out without question. He's the supreme ruler," Leafpaw growled, blue eyes glowing in fire.

Scorch didn't know what to think about that, it didn't sound fair. But she didn't know anything about the Clans, how they usually worked, to compare it to. She looked up in relief as Moonkit returned. "Skypool said she'd be here in a minute," the gray she-kit reported. The cats fell into silence, the cats mostly staring at Scorch.

"I just have to ask, do you ever clean your fur?" Moonkit asked in a sighed.

"Don't be rude!" Ravenkit hushed her.

"Of course I clean my fur!" Scorch huffed, offended.

"Really? Because you look even worse than the last time I saw you," Moonkit snorted.

"Sooree, but I was scrambling through undergrowth all afternoon," Scorch defended herself. Though she knew her fur never lay completely flat anyways.

And with that note, the approaching paw-steps and heavy herb scent signaled that this medicine-cat, Skypool, was almost there. Scorch looked up as the she-cat appeared, the setting sun illuminating orange on her silver-blue fur.

Looking closer, Scorch saw she had slightly darker gray-blue mottled patches with crystalline white paws and grass-green eyes. "So this is your mystery friend?" Skypool asked, quirking a questioning glance at Moonkit who nodded.

"Well, I must thank you for helping Moonkit the other day. Her wounds were bound nicely and it made my job a whole lot easier!" Skypool thanked her warmly.

Scorch felt a glow of appreciation. "It was no problem. But I have a question, my friend broke her leg and I bound it. But it's really hurting her and she has a fever now, is there anything I can give her to help?" Scorch asked, looking up into those serious green eyes.

Skypool cocked her head, thinking for a moment. "Poppy seeds will numb the pain, I can give you some. Daisy leaves can be used when she's a little bit better. And for her fever... feverfew would probably help the most, but also make sure she's eating and drinking," Skypool advised.

Scorch memorized the information. "What do poppy seeds look like?" She knew what feverfew looked like, her mother had pointed it out once. She also knew what daisies looked like, obviously.

"They're small and black, the flowers are bright red with a big black head in the middle where the seeds are kept," Skypool described. "But I can give you a few now for you to take back, and some feverfew," Skypool mewed, turning and disappearing quickly.

"Your medicine-cat is nice," Scorch mewed, looking at Moonkit who nodded in agreement, respect showed brightly in her ice-blue eyes.

"Even after her mother, Stormstar, was murdered, she still stays so happy," Leafpaw murmured, her admiration brightly evident in her blue eyes.

Scorch flinched. "How was her mother killed?"

"Pinefur murdered our leader, Stormstar, when he took over. He had the WindClan leader killed as well," Boulderkit explained, his previous mischief gone into a dark shadowed gaze. Scorch shivered.

"That must be really hard," she murmured her sympathy.

"As if some cat like *you* could understand," Boulderkit snapped.

Scorch didn't answer, he was half-right. None of her friends or family had been killed, and she wasn't forced to follow the rules of a cat she despised. She may be separated from her family, but she still had her friends, and her family was still waiting for her.

Skypool came back and gave her a rolled up bundle of leaves. "The poppy seeds are inside, and so is the feverfew," Skypool mewed.

Scorch nodded her thanks and grabbed it, hesitating. "Is there a mixture of herbs to make an ointment to help soothe the broken leg,

do you know?" she mumbled around the leaves.

Skypool cocked her head to one side, "You seem to know quite a bit about medicine, I wish there was a cat like you in the Clan," the medicine-cat chuckled. "But I actually don't know much about broken-legs, I've never actually had to deal with one, and neither did my mentor when I was an apprentice, so I'm afraid I can't help you much more," Skypool apologized.

Scorch waved her tail, "Itsh oskay," she lisped out the words around the bundle.

Skypool nodded, giving her a small smile as she stepped back. "Good luck; uh... what was your name?"

"Scorch," she mewed, pulling her mother's heavy accent that she liked. Skypool nodded, but she noticed Leafpaw jerk.

"Something wrong?" she asked the cat.

Leafpaw shook her head, "No-nothing."

Scorch looked at her curiously, feeling that Leafpaw had been unnerved somehow. *Something I said?* "Well, I wish you all the best of luck," Scorch mewed, hesitating, wondering if it was wrong of her to leave them to this seemingly awful arrangement.

"Thank you, but don't worry about us. This is one hornet's nest you don't want to stir," Skypool laughed. But now Scorch felt it, the forced cheerfulness that Skypool was showing her.

She nodded and turned away, following her previous route quickly. Her thoughts raced with her paws as she reached the border just as the sunlight disappeared. She paused after crossing the border, looking up into the indigo sky.

The cat with Song told me that I cannot save the Clans, and Skypool told me not to stir the hornet's nest, but... I think that before I'm gone, the hornet's nest is definitely going to be stirred.

Chapter 10: Looking Away

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Scorch plodded with her head down toward where they'd made their makeshift den. She couldn't get the image of the Clan cats out of her minds. They'd acted happy, fairly care-free, but it was all an act, an attempt to make things seem normal for them. It felt so wrong to just leave.

But there's nothing I can do, even my mirages are telling me that! She frowned; feeling helpless was not something she was used to. *But I'm not helpless! I need to hurry and help Mira!* Focusing herself on that, she picked up the pace.

By the time she reached the den, she could hear Mira's moans along with Painted and Jump's voices arguing. "You don't let a kit go out on her own like that! If you hadn't forgotten, it was because of that mistake earlier that Mira got hurt! And the entire reason we came with Scorch in the first place!" Painted was growling.

"But I couldn't leave Mira alone!" Jump defended himself.

"Then you should have made her wait until I got back! If Scorch ends up dead you're in trouble," Painted growled again.

"Well, I'm not dead, so that's great," Scorch interrupted them, mumbling her words around the leaf packet.

"Scorch!" Jump's exclamation almost drowned out Painted's heavy sigh of relief.

"Where were you?" Painted demanded, eyeing Jump sharply.

Scorch caught her breath, wondering what excuse Jump had used. "I went to find more herbs to help Mira," she mumbled, hoping it was close enough to not rouse Painted's suspicion. Both Jump and she would be in huge trouble if Painted found out where she'd

really been.

Painted eyed her closely for a moment, unable to decide to believe her or not, before sighing and shaking her head. "Well, did you find anything?" the dotted cat asked instead.

"Yep!" Scorch answered happily. "I've got poppy seeds to help dull the pain and let her sleep better, and feverfew to make her fever go down," Scorch mewed, striding past them to the den.

"That sounds useful, but how do you know it'll help?" Painted asked.

"My mother told me about herbs, remember?" Scorch muttered, feeling uncomfortable with lying so much.

"You never mentioned them before," Painted continued suspiciously.

"Because I've never actually seen the plants they come from before, so I didn't know if I'd be able to find them," Scorch kept lying; she'd rather just tell Painted the truth and face her anger. But Jump's warning face kept her tongue tied.

"Well, if it helps Mira I guess it doesn't really matter," Painted sighed, turning away while Scorch opened the herb packet, carefully grabbing the black seeds and separating them from the feverfew leaves.

"Okay, Mira, if you eat this it'll make you feel better," she cooed, gently prying Mira's mouth open and putting the herbs into her mouth. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she stroked Mira's throat until she'd swallowed the feverfew leaves and poppy seeds.

"How come you know so much about herbs? How much did your mother really teach you?" Jump asked, eyeing her movements critically.

"She actually only showed me on the afternoon before I was swept away. But it just stuck in my mind, I have a hard time forgetting anything, really," Scorch explained, rubbing Mira's quivering side with a small paw, her eyes watching for the effects of the herbs.

It worked quickly, Mira's fever-ridden doze turned into a peaceful slumber, the she-cat falling into the depths of dreams and her fever lightening. Scorch sighed in relief, and then looked at Mira's broken leg again, she hated to disturb Mira once she finally got to sleep, but this needed to be taken care of.

"Jump, Painted? I need your help with something," Scorch mewed, pulling out a pile of rushes, cobwebs, and comfrey she'd gathered after she'd first bound Mira's leg.

"What is it?" Jump asked, jumping to her side.

"I need to reset the brace on her leg. The one I put on before just kept her leg from moving, but if it stays like this, her leg will heal wrong," Scorch explained, carefully starting to unbind the rough stick and rush brace.

"Will it hurt her?" Painted asked, coming up behind her.

Scorch sighed, "Yes, that's why I wanted to wait until she was more restful, but we can't put it off or her leg will never heal correctly," Scorch explained.

"How do you know?" Jump asked suspiciously.

Scorch blinked, how *did* she know? She wasn't sure, she just knew. *Maybe something I've seen?* Her thoughts flashed back to her mirages, she'd once seen a cat bind a broken leg of another cat, it had looked different then Mira's leg. Maybe that was how she knew.

"I can't explain right now," Scorch mewed, pushing the always troublesome thoughts of her mirages out of her mind. Right now she needed to focus. She quickly cleaned her small paws so that it wouldn't mess up the comfrey ointment she used. She grabbed one of the wide, waxy leaves she'd used to carry the herbs back from Clan territory, and quickly whipped up an ointment of comfrey, cobnuts, and broom.

Leaving that there to be applied, she turned to the now unbound broken leg. "Okay, help me reposition it," Scorch sighed, already feeling guilty for having to cause Mira more pain. *But it'll be better*

for the long run.

They moved the broken leg, stretching it out so that it was no longer crooked. Mira's screeches of pain slammed against Scorch's tiny ears as she finally put the leg in place with Painted and Jump's help. Then she used stiff rushes to brace the leg, while using a bare minimum of cobwebs and bindweed to hold it in place.

Then she grabbed the ointment, rubbing it onto the leg, especially the break area, with gentle swipes from her tiny paws. Mira still moaned at her touch, but she was falling back to sleep now that her leg was done being moved.

Having put the ointment on, Scorch used fennel as her leaf choice to help keep the ointment from smearing off, using more cobwebs to secure it on. *I wish I knew of something better to keep the ointment on...* But she supposed it didn't matter since Mira wouldn't be moving anytime soon.

She finished binding the brace with the bindweed and sat back with a sigh. Silver-white moonlight shined through brightly on her as she sat back to admire her work. The leg looked better, stretched out by Mira's side, the clean brace and ointment holding her leg securely.

I wonder how long it'll take the leg to heal... I'll probably have to use Mira's feel of it to judge. But tomorrow I'll get more poppy seeds, if we can dull the pain for a few days and keep her resting when she's not eating or drinking, it'll heal better.

Scorch's small jaws opened in a huge yawn, her eyes being forced closed. "Scorch, are you hungry? There's still some prey left," Painted offered her.

Scorch barely registered the words and instead looked up at the sky, it was moon-high. She stared at the moon, so big and lovely and bright in such a dark sky...

...

"Hmm?" Scorch awoke with a confused yawn. She was in a warm little moss nest in the den not far from where Jump slept by Mira's

side, careful that he did not touch her broken leg.

I don't remember going to a nest last night... I finished working on Mira's wound and then... and then... She couldn't remember, she remembered thinking how beautiful the moon was in the black sky and then she'd...

She shrugged, getting up and walking stiffly over to the den entrance. *Guh, why am I so stiff?* She recalled yesterday that began with being attacked and ended with a late night struggle. *I guess I shouldn't be surprised my body is so sore then... after all I'm still pathetically small.*

She looked out the den, misty golden sunlight filtered through the dark pine trees, gleaming off the dew on the grass. The air was cold and nipped at her nose with the wind. She shivered, fluffing out her unruly fur. She looked at it; *I look worse than a cat half-drowned and dragged through a bramble bush backwards!*

And she'd seen what a cat looked like after having that done to them; one of her mirages had been unlucky enough to show her that rather hilarious scenario. She quickly started grooming her burnished red and orange mottled fur, taking extra care over her three black spots, the only spots where the fur was silky smooth. She finished everything but her tail; she could take care of that later.

That's better, she sighed in contentment as she worked out the last knotted bunch of fur. She felt better now, fresher. And her fur looked better, brighter, but it was still a little rumpled looking. She looked around, wondering where Painted was, the sun had been rising when she got up, and Painted was usually up by now.

Was she even in the den? Scorch looked in the den and frowned when she didn't see Painted. She shrugged, not really worried about the absence of the dotted she-cat. Since its Painted, *she's probably just fine and not doing anything silly.*

Scorch's nose caught the scent of prey and she spotted a pile at the base of a pine tree, half-covered with pine needles to keep the scent from attracting unwanted visitors. *It may be from yesterday, but I'm*

so hungry I don't care! She pulled out a mouse and gulped it down, surprising herself by how fast she finished the rather large mouse.

Oh yeah, she tilted her head to the side, *I didn't eat a single thing yesterday after the fight and caring for Mira*. She suddenly remembered her tail; *I never took care of that wound!* She looked at the one part she'd neglected to clean. She actually almost never cleaned her tail, since it just dragged the ground and got dirty again so quickly.

But the wound where the attempt had been made to bite her tail off was still there, stinging and itching beneath the dried brown blood. *I'll wash it in a creek later*, Scorch decided, not wanting to put her sore tongue on that. *Too bad it's impossible to bind a wound on a tongue... I bit it a lot yesterday!*

Having finished taking care of herself, almost on cue, a bunch of bushes started rustling and Scorch sniffed, the air, proud to be able to tell it was Painted before the she-cat stepped through. "Scorch, how are you this morning?' Painted asked.

"Fine, I feel better than last night," Scorch mewed, looking up.

"Good, I was a little worried when you went and passed out on the spot last night. But I guess you just needed rest," Painted sighed. Scorch nodded in agreement, *well, and food*, she mentally added.

"I was thinking of looking for more poppy seeds, and some more herbs later, is that okay?" Scorch asked, wondering if she'd be given enough time to check back up on Moonkit and her friends. She also secretly wanted to learn more about herbs from Skypool.

Painted looked at her thoughtfully for a few moments. "If you stay away from Clan territory, it's okay with me... But later I want to show you how to defend yourself, so that you don't always have to run since... well, you're a little too small to be able to outrun most things, except maybe a badger," Painted mewed.

"What's a badger?" Scorch asked.

"A big black and white creature, it's very strong but not very fast.

Don't ever engage one in battle, just get away from it as fast as you can," Painted ordered.

Scorch nodded, wondering what it looked like. "Well, I'm off," she mewed, getting to her paws and scampering off, hoping to find a stream to drink from and clean her tail, and also look for more poppy flowers and feverfew. Mira's fever had been mostly gone this morning, but she wanted to keep it that way.

She encountered a rather full stream, and carefully edged down the steep bank to lap up a few mouthfuls of the fast-flowing water. Then she carefully moved her tail into the water, watching it whip around wildly and helplessly in the stream.

The water was cold and she shivered, but kept her tail in until the dried, matted blood had been mostly washed away. Lifting it out, she ran her tongue over the soaking fur, drying the part where the wound was. She inspected it and found no clean bite marks, but a torn ragged tear from the pulling on the tail.

She twitched the tip of her tail, glad she still had feeling in her tail, she'd been worried her tail would end up like her mother's paw, and she wouldn't have feeling past the bite. *I guess only really severe injuries result in that.*

She winced as her tongue ran over the wound, something was wrong. It didn't sting like wounds should when touched. It throbbed, burned, and ached at the same time it itched. *Is it infected? Mother mentioned something about infections...*

Scorch frowned, than shrugged. *It'd heal, wouldn't it?* And the wound was so small she didn't think it needed to be bound, it wasn't bleeding anymore after all. Now she started sniffing around for feverfew which her mother had told her grew near water.

Ah-ha! She sparked with triumph as she saw the green plant with the daisy-looking small white flowers. She chomped on the stems and tore clumps, enjoying the sweet snapping of the stems and the fresh green smell that filled her nose.

There! She thought happily, looking at the gigantic pile, but she

wondered if she could carry it all back. She pushed the clump safely under a root of a shrubbery where it wouldn't blow away while she looked for poppy seeds.

She didn't know what they looked like, and she didn't know where they grew, but Skypool had described them as a red flower. It couldn't be that hard to miss a splash of red in all this green and brown, right? *Of course, plants are starting to die back with the cold...*

She wandered around for a while, spotting the Clan border several time, but staying a safe distance away. *Are those it?* She saw some bright red flowers with butter-fly petals and a round black head. She breathes in the scent; she couldn't decipher what they were by smell, since the poppy seeds had hardly had a scent.

But they look like what Skypool described; she said the seeds were in the black head. She picked a flower, using her small claws to carefully cut the head out of the flower. Holding the head in her tiny black paw, she shook it gently, and her eyes widened as a few tiny black seeds fell out.

It is poppy seeds! Bubbling happiness and relief flushed through her. She quickly grabbed two more heads, unsure of how much she'd need for Mira. She went and dropped them back with her feverfew bundle. She looked up at the sky, it wasn't quite sun-high, she may have time to go visit the Clans.

Just to check up on Moonkit, it'd be horrible if we got in so much trouble to not have helped the kit. She reasoned, her paws already taking her to the border. She was amazed as she crossed the border, already knowing which direction to head in.

She had a few close passes by a few cats, seeing their fur through the undergrowth, but her pelt hid well in the fallen red and orange leaves and she wasn't spotted. She went back to the tear in the barrier when she reached the camp, spying through to the camp.

The wind had blown in clouds, and cold gray light lit up the camp. She spotted Leafpaw with another cat that was Leafpaw's size, and Ravenkit with Boulderkit, but she didn't see Moonkit, the other kit, or Skypool. *They look fine, I'm sure they'll figure something out*

eventually. Scorch nodded to herself, wondering if her entire trek out here was just a waste of time.

But her curiosity was itching; she wanted to know what about the Clans made them so different. What was her father's former home like? If they were stuck here, she may as well find out. *But who to ask...*

"Shh, they'll hear us," a murmured whisper caught her ears. She backed out of the hole and turned to look at two kits, Moonkit and Gorsekit, sneaking out from another spot in the border.

"If you're just going to freak out, go back!" Moonkit answered back.

Scorch tilted her head to one side. *What are they doing?* They looked like they were trying to be sneaky, but they weren't even trying to stay off the main trail. *Are they playing a game?* Scorch's interest peaked, she bounded over to them as quietly as she could, and making sure her paws avoided the fallen leaves.

She came up behind them, stifling a giggle as they looked around, but didn't detect her presence. *They need a lot of practice in this game!* "Where are we going? Gorsekit mewed.

"I don't know! Just someplace, now hush!" Moonkit answered in a hissing whisper.

"What are you playing?" Scorch whispered, a giggle in her voice.

Moonkit jumped high in the air and Gorsekit stiffened, muffling a yelp as he turned around. "Scorch?!" Moonkit spat, outraged, shocked, and scared.

Scorch tilted her head to the side, "What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

"What are you doing here?" Moonkit spat, looming over her as well as the older kit could.

"I was bored," Scorch mewed, guessing that Moonkit wouldn't appreciate her saying she was worried.

"So you just sneak into my territory because you're bored?" Moonkit hissed.

"Yeah? So?" Scorch frowned, confused at the horror on Gorsekit's face, as if she'd said something really wrong. Moonkit had a blank look of shock and disgust on her face.

"In the Clans, only members of the Clan can enter the territory, you're now allowed!" Moonkit hissed.

Scorch frowned even more, "But I crossed the border and nothing happened, and it's not like I'm doing anything wrong," she defended herself.

"That's not the point!" Moonkit seethed.

"Then what is?" Scorch countered, a little upset by Moonkit's attempt to exclude her.

Moonkit paused, her mouth wide open but no words coming out. "You-you're just not supposed to," Moonkit huffed, not really giving a reason.

"If you can't find a real reason, I don't have to abide by it," Scorch shot back, a little snottily.

Moonkit growled and leapt for her, claws out. Scorch freaked out a little as Moonkit's claws dug into her fur, clawing and hurting her as she was tumbled on her back. "Stop that!" Scorch panicked, she didn't want to hurt Moonkit! Keeping her claws sheathed, she tried to push the bigger kit off as Moonkit growled in her ear, biting down on the soft velvet fur.

"I said stop!" Scorch cried, aiming a sharp blow for Moonkit's muzzle and shoving the kit off of her. She backed up a few paces as Moonkit jumped to her paws again. Scorch knew she was out of breath and she stung in several places where Moonkit had scratched and bit her. Suddenly she was scared.

She was trembling; she remembered the black Clan cats. She'd thought Moonkit and her friends were different, but Moonkit had

attacked her for no reason just like the black cats. Something clicked, she'd been annoyed by Painted and Jump for hating the Clans. But now, she knew why.

"I thought you were different," Scorch's voice came out, distant, different. Her head tilted up, to the side, so she was glaring down at Moonkit. Her eyes narrowed, the first feelings of hate started flowing through her.

For a moment, she saw, crystal clear, an image of a mirage of hers showing her how exactly to defeat Moonkit and Gorsekit. Her claws unsheathed by themselves, the movements she'd witnessed forcing themselves into her muscles and paws.

"*Scorch.*" The one, whispered, horrified voice rang through her and she jumped, looking around, the fear fading along with the hate. *Song?* She wondered, looking back at Moonkit who was staring at her nervously.

"Did you hear that?" Scorch asked, frowning and looking around, momentarily forgetting Moonkit had attacked her.

Moonkit looked confused, along with her pal, Gorsekit. "No, I didn't hear anything," Moonkit answered in a nervous mew.

"Oh," Scorch frowned. *What just happened? I saw an image of a mirage showing me how to kill Moonkit and Gorsekit, and... was I about to do it? I don't remember thinking it... What the heck is wrong with me?!* Now she felt more afraid of herself.

She was shaking again, but now she was staring at her paws, imagining them blood red, not with her own blood, but with the blood of another. *If I hadn't been snapped out of it, would I have done it?* Now she looked at Moonkit fearfully.

"I need to go," she mumbled, backing up. Moonkit watched her go, her ice blue eyes trailing her. Scorch could feel it, the fear, confusion, the apology... That's what relived Scorch the most, pushing the gory thoughts away in a ray of hope. But she couldn't forget, couldn't ignore, she'd almost killed the two kits, and she hadn't felt as if she'd had any control over the matter.

How can I keep myself from doing it, when I can't stop it?! She shook her head and sprinted away, fleeing from the encounter, putting time between her and the experience. *I can't ignore this though, not something this serious, I can look away from the trouble the Clans are in, but I can't look away from this.*

Chapter 11: Last Chance

Chapter 11: Last Chance

Scorch ran through the forest, the images of her mirage showing her how to kill the two Clan cats kept replaying in her mind. *What is wrong with me?!* She hadn't thought about it for a while, but she felt that something was very, very wrong with her.

Of course there's something wrong with me! Who sees cats that aren't there?! She skidded to a halt, her paws burning and her lungs gasping in air as she flung her head back, looking through the red and orange leaves to the gray sky.

The wind tore through the forest, rattling the trees and pulling at her fur. A scent touched her nose, the familiar, comforting scent of herbs. She looked at the scratches she'd received from Moonkit. None of them were deep and they had hardly bled, but they still stung, like her feelings.

She thought of Moonkit, what had her senses picked up on from her previous encounters with the dark gray she-kit? Moonkit had always seemed... frustrated, angry, upset, and maybe even a little depressed. That was the aura Moonkit always had around her, a fairly gloomy one.

Scorch stopped and mulled through the meanings of those emotions as she turned toward the herb smell. *But none of those feelings were ever directed at me, so I never thought much about them. But then she attacked me anyways*. Scorch frowned, what big thing was upsetting Moonkit to the point of lashing out at anyone and everyone?

Scorch's train of thought was interrupted when she saw that there was a cat moving among the herb patch. *It's Skypool!* She recognized the medicine-cat, but wasn't sure if she should approach her or go away. Her instincts told her to go away; she shouldn't have anything more to do with the Clans. But she wanted to know anyway, so she'd give the Clans one last chance to explain

themselves.

And Skypool doesn't seem like the kind of cat to attack another cat just because of emotion. "Skypool?" she mewed quietly, stepping into the small clearing where the sun would shine on a clear day.

Skypool jumped, turning toward her, her silver-blue fur looking grayer in the clouded sunlight. The medicine-cat's jaws were full of herbs she was picking and her green eyes were wide as she stared at her. "Scorch?" the word was muffled and questioning.

Scorch nodded, knowing that she must have a dejected look on her face for the way Skypool's eyes immediately showed concern. "What's wrong?" Skypool asked, dropping her bundle of herbs and approaching her slowly.

Scorch felt another surge of gratefulness for the medicine-cat she barely knew. *I only met her once, and she already cares enough about me to ask what's wrong*. With a lump in her throat she sat down with a bump, looking at the ground.

"I-I went to see Moonkit, and she attacked me," she admitted, feeling the fresh sting of hurt that Moonkit had attacked her, when she'd done nothing but try to help her.

Skypool gave a hum of sympathy, though Scorch could sense that Skypool was surprised by both her actions and Moonkit's. "Moonkit hasn't been the same since... well, she lost someone she was close to, and that's hard for someone so young," Skypool offered an explanation.

"But I didn't do that!" Scorch protested, wondering if she should try to talk about her mirages. *No, it's my problem, and how can I be helped when I'm the only one who experiences it?*

"No, you didn't. But Moonkit hasn't been as nice of a kit since then, she's the most likely to lash out at anyone and the least likely to apologize," Skypool continued, sitting down next to Scorch and wrapping her tail around her shoulder comfortingly.

"I only came to learn more about the Clans," Scorch muttered,

looking down at the ground.

"You did?" Skypool sounded more surprised now.

"Yeah," Scorch looked up at Skypool. "My father used to be a part of ShadowClan," she explained.

Skypool blinked, looking even more confused, then she started laughing. "I thought there was something familiar about your scent! So you're half ShadowClan, huh? Well, your father was smart to leave, they're in even deeper trouble then we are," Skypool sighed.

"What happened to them?" Scorch asked.

Skypool tilted her head to the side for a moment. "Why don't I first teach you about how the Clans are supposed to be?" Skypool started by explaining the warrior-code, the honor law the Clans lived by. She continued by explaining the different positions in the Clans and how the different Clans were both connected and separated.

"So each Clan has some special skill to be used for their specific territory?" Scorch clarified, wondering how different a few cats could be.

"That's right; ThunderClan is good at stalking through the undergrowth and staying hidden, and ShadowClan cats like to use the night to hunt and fight, I don't know how they do it, but they see fairly well in the dark," Skypool explained.

Scorch nodded, thinking back to her vision at night. It never seemed particularly strong, but she did like the night. She felt comfortable wandering in the dark even if she couldn't see. "So, what happened to the Clans?" Scorch asked, her mind had, as she'd expected, taken the information in well and painted a picture of the Clans as they should be.

In her mind, she saw four Clans, each abiding by their own territory and following a set of honorable codes. She saw them fighting each other in their glory, over admirable things, and how they never took the lives of their opponents. That really struck in her mind that Clan cats did not kill to win battles.

Because when she faced those black cats, they definitely had seemed to want to kill her. "Well, Scorch, several moons ago, our deputy, Pinefur, raised an army of rouges and attacked his Clan. We'd been given some warning by another rogue, and had an alliance with ShadowClan and WindClan to defeat them, but..." Skypool trailed off, a dismal feeling surrounded the silver-blue she-cat.

Scorch saw how painful this memory was for her, but she wanted to know, it felt like she needed to know. So she leaned against Skypool comfortingly, and let Skypool to continue at her own pace. "But, everything just fell apart."

Scorch listened with her eyes growing wider with horror as she listened to how WinClan had abandoned ThunderClan in the middle of the battle, and the full forces of ShadowClan had never showed. *So they fell apart, because they lied to each other? Couldn't get over their petty differences?* A rumble of anger grew in her belly, but it faded into sorrow as she listened to how Pinefur had then ordered the leaders murdered of both ThunderClan and WindClan, the only Clans he'd managed to conquer.

"He also murdered several more cats in each Clan, weeding out the ones he named weak... I grew up with him in the Clan, I never imagined he could be such a monster," Skypool was shaking and looked ready to cry.

"Was one of the cats he ordered killed the cat Moonkit was close to?" Scorch asked.

Skypool shook her head wearily. "No, that cat died later on, but it's not for me to tell," Skypool gave her a warning look and Scorch got the message. *I won't ask Moonkit, no, I have more sense than that.*

"So, the Clans are being ruled by Pinefur now?" Scorch asked, shocked that any cat could follow such a monster.

Skypool nodded, "He, 'united,' ThunderClan and WindClan, but we still have our separate camps and territories that we mostly stick to. I think Pinefur doesn't want us banding together to defeat one camp, and then turning to the next. Keeping us separate keeps us

too weak to overthrow him."

"But wouldn't that mean his forces are spread thinner as well?" Scorch pondered.

Skypool nodded, "Yes, but he found a way around that. Even though all his cats are skilled, he keeps his most skilled at WindClan while keeping a larger number of cats here, it makes it tricky to defeat them since event though WindClan are less outnumbered, most of their cats are outmatched," Skypool explained.

Scorch frowned. That did make things difficult, but not impossible. "What about ShadowClan and RiverClan?" Scorch asked.

Skypool shrugged, "I don't know what happened to ShadowClan, but I think RiverClan deserves whatever it got, they were the only Clan not to try to face these cats," Skypool snorted angrily.

Scorch looked at her curiously. "Who took over ShadowClan and RiverClan though?"

Skypool thought for a moment, "I'd assume Nightwing, that's the name I heard going around. He and his black cats. But no cat ever really sees them."

"*Black* cats?" Scorch asked, her interest piqued.

Skypool nodded, "They say Nightwing thinks there's something special about black fur, so he only recruited black rogues. I heard he forced all the black Clan cats he conquered join his forces, but I don't know what happened to the rest of the cats. It's almost like they vanished," Skypool frowned.

Scorch shivered, looking at her fur. She had her three black patches, but the rest of her fur was red and orange, like her father's. *Is that why he left? He and mother?* She had a feeling she'd have lots of question to ask them when she got back.

"Well, I need to get back to camp. It was nice talking to you," Skypool purred, standing up and walking back to her herb bundle. Scorch was silent, staring at her paws for a moment.

Then she burst with energy and stared at Skypool. "Wait! I want to ask you something..."

... Skypool's POV ...

Skypool stared at the little kit in front of her. "Are you serious?" she wasn't sure if she was supposed to be angry or amused, but she mostly just felt stunned, her mind refusing to work.

Scorch nodded, looking up at her with those big, dark eyes. Her first impression had been that they were black, but when she'd looked closer they were actually a very dark green, darker than even the dark pine trees in ShadowClan territory.

But, there was something special about this kit, Skypool could just feel it. Back to the matter at paw, "This is a huge request, and I'll have no say in the decision. Not to mention it'll be difficult and dangerous to even consider it," Skypool continued.

Scorch continued to stare at her; those eyes made Skypool think she was just slowly sinking into Scorch's thoughts. She shook her head and instead looked at the bright red and orange rumpled fur of the unruly kit. The colors looked shaded, like the colored leaves of the trees as leaf-fall took hold.

She hesitated, unwilling to give an answer yet. "How old are you?" she asked the small kit. The kit was rather small, but she spoke intelligently and had an air of maturity that Skypool hadn't seen in a kit before.

Scorch frowned slightly, "Four, almost five, moons, I guess," Scorch shrugged and Skypool continued to stare. She didn't really have a reason to refuse the request; after all, she was more or less just carrying a message rather than really making a commitment.

"Scorch, think carefully now, is this something you're absolutely sure you want to do?" Skypool pressed.

Scorch sighed and stood up, tilting her head to look her in the eye. "I'm absolutely certain," Scorch mewed, not breaking eye contact and holding her in those eyes that were too dark to show emotion.

Skypool couldn't say no to that and sighed, hanging her head and shaking it slightly, feeling amusement well up inside her. *What on earth will the others think?* "Then I agree to ask them, I'll meet you at the border tomorrow? And tell you their answer," Skypool mewed.

Scorch waved her tail, "Okay." The little red kit turned away, but Skypool's eyes caught something.

"Hey, didn't you take care of that tail yesterday?" She mewed, frowning at the infected looking wound.

"Oh," Scorch looked at the tail, a blank look of apathy on her face. "I passed out after taking care of Mira," the kit mewed as if it was the most normal thing ever.

Skypool felt completely exasperated, her medicine-cat instincts kicking in. "Come here now," she ordered, turning to the herb bundle she'd left to talk with Scorch. She was glad that they were actually sitting in a marigold patch, and used some cobwebs to bind the tail wound tight after using the marigold juice to help the infection of the wound. Then she also noticed several places on Scorch where the fur was torn away and she had long, but shallow looking, scratches.

"What happened to you?!" Skypool asked, exasperated. Then remembered, Moonkit really did attack her... *I thought Moonkit would have just chased her away!* Now she felt angry with that cat for attacking a kit, but then reminded herself that Moonkit was a kit as well, a kit that had gone through some pretty tough times.

I'll just have a little chat with her. She rubbed marigold juice into the scratches, to prevent infection. None of them needed to be bound with cobwebs and Scorch had fallen into a restful doze while she'd cared for the kit.

Skypool frowned, *is there any cat to take care of this kit? She mentioned she's with friends, but do they really give her the care a kit needs? Because it sounds like Scorch is doing an awfully lot of caring for these other cats!*

If her mother had still been leader, she would have invited the kit

to come live in the Clan for at least a while, but she knew Pinefur would never agree, even if the Thunder, 'deputy,' would probably let it slide.

She sighed, she felt so sure this kit was special, so sure that this kit could change something. But who was she kidding? It was a kit! Even if this kit could eventually did save the Clans, *that* would probably happen first...

Skypool frowned, absent-mindedly stroking the kit's back. She also recalled that Scorch hadn't mentioned a mother or father, what was her story? Why was she with friends instead of family? Why did she know so much about herbs?

Skypool laughed, this story sounded as random as the rogue that had tried to help the Clans. *And if we'd been smarter about it, we probably would have beaten Pinefur*. Skypool had never met the helpful rogue, or heard of her name, but she'd heard from Leafpaw that it had been a small gray she-cat with a funny accent, an accent like Scampfur.

Skypool jumped as something clicked in her mind. *Is that why her accent sounds so familiar?! She's got Scampfur's accent? But she's too young to be his daughter; he died over seven moons ago... Could she be?* She wondered, staring at the now sleeping kit, her eyes shut gently and her breathing deep and steady.

She let out a small laugh. *No way...*

...

Skypool carried Scorch to the border, woke her up, showed her the place they would meet, and then sent the sleepy kit on her way. Skypool arrived back in the marigold clearing later then she liked. In the gray covered sky, the clouds were even darker and the heavy scent of rain promised it wouldn't hold back much longer.

Let's see if I can get back to camp before that happens... She grabbed the herb bundle and started running expertly through the overgrown forest. She'd traversed this territory since she was an apprentice; she knew every hole and root that crossed the path,

hidden below the fallen leaves.

This was her home, and that was why she and everyone else in ThunderClan put up with Pinefur's rule. After all, he couldn't live forever, and they knew the Clan would outlive him as long as they stayed strong. But Skypool didn't know how much longer she could keep patching up her Clan-mates that got beaten by Pinefur or one of his top cronies.

She looked down at her own bruises and scars; she hadn't been exempt from the beatings either. Pinefur never actually ordered beatings unless the cat broke the rules, but his few cats, that had only joined him to fight, would beat a cat up for any reason they saw fit.

Skypool shook her head, no, she'd stay strong, and she wouldn't give up. She owed her mother that much at least, her mother had fought a long, hard life to keep the Clans at peace. *Peace...* it was a wonderful word, a word she longed to be commonplace again.

Right now, nothing was certain. Every cat lived knowing their fragile and fake peace could fall and shatter at any moment. *But this can't last forever, the Clans will all be destroyed by them, or we'll beat them. One or the other will occur.*

Skypool ended her thoughts as she entered camp. She looked around, spotting the, 'deputy,' Goat, near the rock-pile. She stiffened as she saw Pinefur with him. She looked away, whenever she saw him, she only saw his jaws clamping around her mother's neck, blood spilling onto the rain-soaked ground and his red-stained fangs flashing in the lighting.

She shivered, and hurried to her den. "Hey, Skypool!" She froze, turning to look nervously over her shoulder as Pinefur approached her. His sickly green eyes glowed too bright to look out, as if always alighted by evil.

"Yes?" she willed her voice not to tremble as she stared just above his eyes.

"You were out quite a while... want to tell me what that's about?" he

was feigning friendliness, but Skypool, like every other cat, had learned he was obsessed with control. He didn't want any cat to do anything without his knowledge.

And now that he's here, he'll probably stick around for a few days before going back to WindClan. Skypool had so been enjoying the little bit of freedom. "I went out to collect herbs," she mewed, using her tail to angle at the herbs in her mouth.

"Alone? Without telling any cat?" Pinefur was growling now, his eyes glaring at her threateningly when she stole a look at them.

"I-I told Rustle," she defended herself, nodding at the former-rouge tom that was sitting guard.

"Hmm," Pinefur narrowed his eyes at her. "You know you can't go out alone, what would we do if we lost our medicine-cat?" Pinefur's voice became smooth. *I usually take a cat with me, but since you weren't here I thought I could get away with it*. Skypool's rebellious side sparked in her mind.

She jumped back as she was given a ringing blow to her head. "Don't forget the rules," Pinefur growled, looming over her.

She nodded shakily, looking at the ground as she trembled. Most cats were continuing with what they were doing, but she could feel a few worried stares from her Clan-mates, it gave her strength to know she was cared for. She nodded, waiting for Pinefur to dismiss her, and then quickly retreated to the safety of her den.

She put the herbs in their places, stripping the leaves carefully and expertly of the stalks that would be dried in the sun later, when the sun was actually out. Her ears twitched as the first drops of rain began to fall, pelting on fallen leaves with loud crinkles.

The rain fell down more heavily, pounding on the ground and drowning out sound. Skypool looked up; *this is probably the best time*. Stopping at the mouth of her den, she risked a quick dart through the abandoned clearing over to the apprentices den. "Leafpaw!" she hissed at the dozing apprentice.

"Hmm?" Leafpaw lifted her head, blinking open her blurry blue eyes.

"Come to my den quickly, bring Moonkit," she added, and then hurried back to her den, shaking her wet fur and flicking raindrops across the stone cave-den.

Leafpaw arrived a moment later, soaked, with a mostly dry Moonkit hiding under her belly. "Why did you ask us here? In the rain?" Moonkit grumbled, her ice blue eyes glaring at nothing.

Skypool gave the kit a sharp look, not forgetting the scratches covering Scorch. And when she looked, she didn't see any marks on Moonkit's fur. *Scorch obviously didn't fight back that hard*. "I saw Scorch when I was out," she mewed.

Leafpaw looked surprised, blue eyes wide. Moonkit stared at the ground. "Moonkit?" Skypool growled, giving her one last chance to explain herself.

"She was on our territory! Rogues aren't allowed!" Moonkit defended herself, while Leafpaw looked confused, then her expression cleared, guessing at what had happened.

"Maybe, but no cat told her before, right? She wouldn't know that. And it also means you were outside of camp again," Skypool mewed sternly. She used to be amused by kits trying to sneak out of camp; she had done it when she was a kit as well, after all. But Pinefur didn't tolerate it, so if he were to find out... The harshness of beatings weren't adjusted by age.

Moonkit looked at her paws. "Sorry," the kit muttered, looking sideways at the ground.

"Look, Pinefur is back, so I want you to be extra careful, okay?" Skypool could hear the plea in her own voice. She was desperate that the kit wouldn't get herself into any more serious trouble.

"Now, the other thing," Skypool continued, after giving Moonkit a harsh stare for a few moments. "Scorch asked me of something, and I can't agree or disagree, since, Leafpaw, this is mostly going to be

your decision," she mewed, staring down at the middle-aged apprentice.

"Yes?" Leafpaw asked.

Skypool took a deep breath and delivered the message. Moonkit stared at her as if she was crazy, but she'd expected that, and Leafpaw was looking at her with perplexity. "It's rather surprising that she asked that..." the apprentice let out a deep breath. "What did you tell her?" Leafpaw asked quickly.

"I said I would tell you, and deliver your answer tomorrow," Skypool answered.

Leafpaw groaned, getting up and pacing around. "That doesn't give me much time to think," the red she-cat grumbled.

"Then don't, go with your first instinct," Skypool encouraged.

Leafpaw looked at her through narrowed, unreadable eyes for a few moments. "Did you notice Scorch's accent?"

Skypool nodded, not surprised Leafpaw had realized it first, since, after all, Scampfur had been her father. "She had the same accent as your father."

"And the rogue that warned the Clans," Leafpaw added to which Skypool nodded.

Moonkit huffed, "What are you talking about?" the kit whined. Neither of them answered her, just looked at each other closely.

"The rogue's name was Rainstone, I remember her," Leafpaw mewed, pacing again. "She saved my life," Leafpaw muttered, "Twice," Skypool heard the added mutter.

Skypool frowned and looked at the apprentice, almost seeing the wheels turning in her mind. Leafpaw suddenly stopped her pacing and looked at her. "I'll come with you to see Scorch tomorrow, if she is Rainstone's daughter, then I'll do what she requested, but only if she is," the red cat declared.

Skypool nodded, it was settled. *This is the last chance for every cat; it all depends on Scorch's legacy*. And Moonkit was just sitting quietly, looking at them as if they were both completely insane. *And maybe we are.*

Chapter 12: First Step

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Scorch yawned, trying to wake up, but not being able to pull herself out of the drowse of sleep. *Where am I going again? Oh yeah, to collect those herbs I left... where? Under a shrub root by the stream...*

She shook her head, hoping to at least find which direction she should wander in. After falling asleep while Skypool cared for her wounds, she hadn't stopped feeling tired. *Maybe I didn't sleep long enough last night.* Thinking about it, she had fallen asleep at midnight and woken just after dawn. She hadn't actually slept that long.

She was thankful to Skypool, she wouldn't have expected a Clan cat she'd met only once to be so kind. And she was amazed at how much better she felt after her wounds had been taken care of. She'd been feeling torn and scratched, but she hadn't realized how much it'd been hurting.

Now I just have to wait for their answer. Scorch's heart fluttered nervously at the thought. This was something she wanted to do, as long as she was so close to the Clans. She wanted to participate in her heritage; she really didn't care that it would be with ThunderClan instead of ShadowClan. No way would she ask those black cats to do this.

She flicked her ears as she heard the gurgle of the stream. With another yawn that forced tears to her eyes, she stumbled in that direction, coming up upon the stream. She wasn't sure when she'd crossed it, but she was now on the opposite side that she needed to be on.

Okay, so it's too wide to jump across and too deep to wade. What now? Her mind was still asleep, so she couldn't think her way around the problem. Instead, she started walking along the stream, waiting for a solution to appear to her problem.

Ah-hah. Scorch yawned again as she spotted the solution she'd conveniently stumbled upon. A log lay across the stream, or river, whichever one preferred. It must have been stuck by some rock, but it would work well enough. *Okay, senses, time to come back.*

She tried once more to wake herself up, but to no avail as her eyes tried to slide closed. Reaching up, she stood on her back legs and placed her front paws on the slippery wood. Jumping up, she dug her claws into the soggy wood as it bounced under her movement.

She slid her paws forward over the wood, waving her tail in an effort to keep her balance on the slippery and rather thin log, or more exactly, rather thick stick. But she made it to the other side safely and wondered which way she should go, upstream or downstream?

She decided to head downstream, since she'd been fairly close to Clan territory when she'd found her herbs. And with things working out rather well, she found her herbs untouched in not too long. *There, now to get back to the den and take a nap*.

She grimaced as her belly rumbled, *after I have some food*. Heading back the way she'd come that morning, she felt the light patter of rain hitting her from beneath the pine trees. But the thick trees were at least good for keeping her mostly dry as she rain came down heavier.

She muffled her yawn, not wanting to drop the herbs she was carrying in her mouth. Her pelt was damp, but she still wasn't awake. A flash off lighting startled her and she flinched, before jumping and sprinting forward as thunder crashed around her.

Her heart jumped in her chest and she was shaking. *Okay, okay, I'm awake now*. Ears alert and eyes wide and wary, she continued home quickly, walking on her toes as she trotted forward. *There's the den!* Scorch bounced with relief.

"Gumaph," she groaned as she was snatched by her scruff and her paws were swung off the ground. She churned her paws through the air, huffing, trying to loosen the cat's grip on her scruff. But she wasn't scared; she recognized the cat's scent.

"You're late," Painted growled around her scruff.

Scorch glared up in annoyance, her jaws clamped stubbornly around her herbs. She wasn't going to explain herself right now, being held off the ground and her jaws full of herbs. Also, she refused to argue in the rain and thunder.

Her defiant look was broken when she squeaked and started trembling again as the thunder clapped deafeningly loud. "You're scared of thunder?" Painted's mew was surprised.

Scorch didn't respond, she just wanted to be away from this storm right *now*. Wriggling out of Painted's loosed grasp, she darted to the den and stood, shaking, just inside the den, her jaws trembling on the bunch of herbs she carried.

She looked at Mira; the she-cat was sleeping restlessly now. *The poppy seeds probably wore off a while ago*. But she couldn't move, she just wanted to curl down and wait the storm out. She didn't know how she could focus with the thunder rumbling.

She gasped at another crash of thunder, she felt it vibrating in her chest and she knew she was trembling again. Suppressing her fear with a shudder, she put down the damp herbs and wondered if it'd be worse to not have something to muffle her sounds of fear.

She looked around, seeing Jump snoring peacefully from beside Mira, and Painted had come into the shelter of the den. "If it stops raining soon enough, I'll still teach you some fighting skills," Painted mewed, sitting down at the entrance of the den so she could look out into the rain.

Scorch gave a sound of acknowledgement, stiffening up again at another loud rumble of thunder. Sitting down, she stared at her front paws, one red, and one black. She just stared at the, trying to numb out the fear, consequently numbing out all thoughts and causing herself to go in a light doze.

When she woke up again, hazy golden sunlight shone on her damp feeling fur and the heavy scents of the forest had been amplified by the rain. "The sun is just setting," Painted mewed; her voice muffled

by whatever she was eating.

Scorch sat up, yawning. "Did it just stop raining?" she asked sleepily.

"It's still sprinkling," Painted responded.

"How's Mira?" Scorch asked, getting up on her paws wobbly.

"I'm okay," Scorch jumped as Mira answered. She raced over to the gray she-cat, relief flowing through her.

"Mira!" she exclaimed, purring and almost crying at the same time.

"What's the matter with you?" Mira laughed, nosing her gently. She was still stretched out on her side, her head resting on her leg that wasn't injured.

Scorch flinched when she saw Mira wince from the small movement. She remembered how Mira had gotten hurt, guilt pressed down on her shoulders again. Looking at the ground, she mumbled some incoherent words. "I'm sorry," she mewed clearly, looking at her with eyes she knew were shiny with unshed tears.

Mira purred lightly, "It's okay; there is no reason to be sorry. But thank you, Jump told me how much you helped with my leg," Mira mewed.

Scorch felt a surge of love and affection for this cat. Mira hadn't tried to advert blame, hadn't tried to convince her it wasn't her fault, instead; Mira had told her there was no reason to regret or feel guilty about what had happened, in such short words. "Thank you!" Scorch sniffed, blinking away her tears and grinning at the cat.

"Okay, Scorch, check over Mira and then come eat," Painted ordered from where she'd been evidently watching from her meal.

"Right," Scorch nodded, falling into serious mode as she looked over Mira. "Have you eaten yet?" Scorch asked.

"No," Mira shook her head. "However, I did have some of water;

Jump went to get me more."

Scorch nodded, water was probably more important. "Well? Do you feel up to eating?" she asked, putting her paw to Mira's head to feel how warm she was.

"My stomach is a little queasy, but I am hungry," Mira admitted.

"Hmm," Scorch thought for a moment, Mira's fever was light, but still there, enough to make her feel bad at least. "Well, you will probably be just fine eating a soft mouse if you have some feverfew as well," Scorch muttered more to herself then any cat else.

"Painted, is there any soft prey for Mira to eat?" she asked.

Painted nodded and left for a moment, coming back with a small, young shrew. "Perfect," Scorch nodded, going to the herbs she'd collected, and taking out a serving size of feverfew. The same amount as Skypool had given her yesterday. *When she has a lighter fever, should I give her less?* It was those kinds of questions that itched at her mind.

She decided to give Mira a slightly lighter dose then last night, "Okay, how's your leg feeling?" Scorch asked as Mira ate the feverfew and then worked on the shrew, obviously happy to have something to wash out the bad taste of the herbs.

"It hurts, a lot," Mira mewed around a mouthful.

Scorch looked at the brace and poultice, the brace was just fine looking, but the poultice probably should be replaced every day. *Except I don't have any more comfrey, and I don't have much broom left.* She decided she'd have to collect more first thing next morning and fix it then. *One night won't hurt it.*

Jump returned with a giant soaked moss ball just around the time Mira finished her shrew. Scorch observed as Mira drank the water from the moss greedily. Jump was talking quietly with Painted, but Scorch was too focused on Mira to pay any mind to their conversation.

She watched carefully, noticing when Mira winced slightly, when

her paws twitched, her tail flicked, when a flash of pain in her eyes faded. Scorch felt like she had gotten a good feeling for how Mira's injury was affecting her right now, and it'd be important to remember, so that she could tell when Mira was ready to do new things and how well her leg was healing.

Scorch narrowed her eyes; Mira wasn't ready to do any real exercises yet. But she nudged the moss-ball a little further away from Mira, causing her to lean out a little, and use her shoulders, ever so slightly. Mira eyed her with her quiet blue eyes curiously for a moment, Scorch just nodded at her. Mira nodded back, understanding what she was doing.

"Okay, Scorch, eat something and then I'll show you a few moves," Painted ordered.

Scorch looked at the white spotted she-cat. "Okay," she mewed, feeling the rumble in her belly. "Mira," she looked at the soft gray she-cat. "When you're ready to sleep, eat these seeds," she laid out four poppy seeds in front of Mira. "They'll help you sleep deeply," Scorch explained. It was imperative that Mira got a good night's sleep and wasn't kept awake by her leg.

Mira nodded and Scorch turned, finding a small, soggy mouse as the last piece of fresh-kill waiting for her. She ate it quickly, not wanting to savor the taste of cold, wet mouse. "Okay," she sighed, feeling the ache in her muscles.

Painted led her out of the den and into the clearing surrounding the den, the arching pine trees covered most of the sky except for in the middle of the clearing where a clear patch of purple-orange sky showed. The needle floor was wet and the pine needles stuck to her paws.

The dark, shadowy forest around them was too quiet compared to the ThunderClan forest. She liked how she could see far beneath the pine trees, but then her sight just faded to darkness, as if the forest refused to allow her to see any further.

"Okay, I'll show you what to do if you are attacked," Painted mewed, falling quickly on her side, rolling, and jumping back to her

paws. "This works if some cat leaps for you and misses, or if they do hit you. Just roll with their hit, and jump away," Painted explained, then invited her to try it.

Scorch flopped on her side, feeling the wet needles poke her, but she rolled over as quickly as she could, and then scrambled to her paws, slipping a little on the wet needles. "Keep your paws tucked in when you roll, it'll make your roll smoother and make getting back to your paws much easier," Painted instructed, pacing around her in a large circle.

Scorch nodded, envisioning it in her mind. She fell to her side, rolling even before she hit the ground, her paws tucked up against her. When she finished the roll, her paws were right there and she shot her legs out, back on her paws in a moment.

"Excellent, practice it for a while, so that if you do get attacked, you do it just out of instinct," Painted mewed. Scorch nodded, doing it several times, until she could do it without thinking and her aching muscles burned.

"Moving on, if while you're running away and the cat comes close to catching you, stop and face them quickly, dart in a give there paws a quick nip before running again, it'll shock them more than anything, since they won't know if you're still running or going to attack again." Painted explained.

Scorch nodded. "Now, try nipping my paws before I can catch you," Painted ordered, tensing her muscles.

Scorch frowned, she'd seen Painted fight, and the tall she-cat was good. She tried to dart in, aiming for one place then the next, counting on her small size to help. But just as she brushed her muzzle past Painted's leg, she felt something heavy swat down on the side of her cheek.

Gasping, she was flung back out of the clearing; skidding on the wet needle floor and feeling her eyes roll back as her heart seemed to stop beating. Then she felt sensations flow through her again, and she knew she was out of danger of going unconscious.

She got to her paws shakily; her head felt like it was swelling and full of nothing. "Sorry, I hit you a little harder then I meant," Painted apologized, sounding more annoyed then sorry.

Scorch looked at her, realizing that this was a major problem. She was so small and light; the first blow could be her last in a fight. *I can't get hit, not ever*. But that was a tall order; it'd be very difficult to succeed in that.

It's not impossible, I'm small, a much smaller target than most. But if I can become fast in my movements, then I won't be caught. But I have to be quick, and I can't move like I'm expected to move. Scorch frowned; she'd have to think her way around fights, since she couldn't win in a head-on fight, at least not for now.

She crouched, facing Painted, her ears flattened and her dark eyes flashing. She darted forward, just like last time, but when she got within Painted's striking range, she spun around the dotted she-cat, grabbing her swinging tail in her tiny jaws, and using the wet pine needles and her tail to swing around out of reach as Painted tried to spin around and grab her.

Once she was sliding in the right direction, she released Painted's tail and went under Painted's belly, running her sheathed paw over Painted's lower leg, and darting away before Painted could figure out where she was. She turned back to look at Painted who was staring at her, jaws wide.

"What just happened?" Painted asked, her bright green eyes showing heavy confusion.

"I got you," Scorch mewed.

"I couldn't even tell which way you were moving," Painted admitted, stepping up toward her.

"That was the point!" Scorch laughed. Painted snorted, rumpling her head with a paw.

"Whatever you say, but well done," Painted answered grudgingly. "Now the sun's set, we should go sleep," Painted mewed, yawning.

Scorch nodded, feeling tired again and a yawn kept her from saying anything more as she headed to the den, paws dragging the ground. They hadn't gone over much, but she still had more knowledge then she'd had before-hand.

And I impressed Painted! That was her last thought as she curled down in her nest.

...

The next morning, she went out the collect comfrey for Mira's poultice. But she left with the more direct purpose of hearing Skypool's answer to her question. It'd been swaying at the back of her mind all day yesterday, and she felt as if it'd shadowed her dreams as well.

This will decide my next step in life. My first step on the long road of my heritage. She went to where she'd found comfrey before, digging up the roots in the damp earth that was shaded by a pine tree. Her paws and muzzle were muddy when she finished, but she had enough to last several days of replenishing the ointment.

Finding some broom, she took some of the shrub's yellow flowers and stem. *Come to think of it... mother never said anything about Broom, so how do I know that it'll help broken bones?* Scorch paused, her mind becoming a blank as she tried to remember how she knew. *Oh well, I'm glad I know anyhow*. She shrugged and then wrapped the herbs in a bundle, making them easier to carry.

It's almost time to go meet Skypool. Nervousness fluttered in her belly like butterflies and her heart seemed to be beating faster than normal. But she felt as if the decision had already been made, she was already going to be given her way.

The blue sky was a perfect halo for the sun, and clouds crowned the distance as she headed back to the border, crossing the river in a narrow place that she could jump across. *Much easier than yesterday*. She paused, herbs still in her mouth, at the border. It was sun-high, the time Skypool had said she'd meet her here.

She sat down in the sunlight, enjoying the warm sun in her fur

rather than the cool breeze that made her shiver in the harshest gusts. Her ears pricked and she set the herbs down as a rustling sounded over the border. She sniffed the air, but she wondered if it hadn't been smart to hold the herbs for so long, since now she could just smell the herbs and mud.

But a flash of silver-blue reassured her and a familiar silver-blue she-cat with mottled darker gray-blue patches stepped out, followed by a slightly less familiar red she-cat. It was Skypool and Leafpaw.

Scorch raised her tail in greeting, but thought it wouldn't sound right to greet them verbally. Skypool nodded at her friendly, and Scorch saw her eyes skimming over her scratches and bound tail wound. Leafpaw was trying to look reserved, but her blue eyes showed keen interest.

"Scorch, Leafpaw wants to ask you one question before she decides if she'll do what you asked or not," Skypool mewed.

Scorch nodded, facing Leafpaw squarely, wondering what kind of question this would be. *Maybe something to test my knowledge, she would want to make sure I'm smart enough to do this.*

"Scorch, do you know a cat named Rainstone?" Leafpaw asked. Scorch felt her eyes widen, to hear her mother's name after so long stunned her. She'd only even told Painted, Jump, and Mira once. And she was sure she'd never even uttered the name since they'd left the white beach.

"Yeah, why?" Scorch mewed warily, wondering how they knew her mother's name.

Leafpaw sucked in a deep breath, "How did you know her?"

Scorch narrowed her eyes, emotions swelling through her. She'd wanted to try not to remember her parents, and how far away she was from them. But now those thoughts, those fears she'd never see them again, flowed right through her. "I should be asking you that! How do you even know my mother?" she asked defensively.

"Mother?" Leafpaw's echoed, eyes widened, but she didn't look

surprised.

"Yeah!" Scorch backed up a pace, fur fluffing up defensively.

"Relax, that's all I wanted to know. I have decided to do what you asked," Leafpaw declared.

Scorch's ears pricked. "Really!?" Excitement bubbled up, sweeping away those upsetting thoughts. "Thank you!" she cried, bouncing in place. Grinning, she looked up at Leafpaw's amused face, red face and blue eyes.

This is it! I can now take the first step on the path of my heritage! And maybe make my own legacy while I'm at it. Scorch looked around, taking in the grass, the trees, the sun, the breeze. This was a moment she'd remember for her whole life, the exhilaration and excitement of doing something new, something different.

"Okay, Scorch," Leafpaw mewed, tapping her head. "I'm going to make a real warrior out of you."

Chapter 13: Just Once

Chapter 13: Just Once

Scorch hummed happily as she trotted back to the den. *I'm going to be trained as a warrior! Leafpaw's going to train me how to hunt and fight, and how to follow the warrior-code!* She wasn't sure why, but this felt very important to her. As if this small bit of training would affect the rest of her life.

She recalled what Leafpaw had said, "*Every day, starting tomorrow, I want you right here at the border at the break of dawn. I'll train you as long as I can until I have to go back to my duties*." Scorch's paws tingled in excitement, what would she learn?

Her bubbling energy subsided as she remembered her mother. She knew her mother had passed by the Clans, since that was how her mother had met her father. But for such a young cat to know of her, Leafpaw must have just been a kit when her mother was here, if not younger, just what exactly had her mother been doing here*?*

Scorch stopped, she'd never even wondered about that. If her mother wasn't from the Clans, why had she been hanging around the Clans? They sure didn't seem terribly friendly to strangers, Scorch was sure it was only because she'd helped Moonkit that the select few ThunderClan cats were willing to help her.

I'd kind of thought she'd been here because she fell in love with my father... But how did she even meet my father? Chance? Coincidence? It must have been one of those things. There's no way she could have met him any other way.

Scorch continued on, jaws clamped on the herbs as she crossed the river, leaping across it with a hung up breath in her chest. Her paws hit the ground and she continued on her way, still deep in her thoughts.

She nearly jumped out of her skin as a flash of orange rushed by

her. She expected to feel fur brush against her, but she felt nothing. Then she realized that while she'd been sinking into her thoughts, the colors had been fading the gray and the sounds had been rushing away from her. *My mirages.*

But she hadn't been focusing her mind on the world, she'd just been thinking. *Am I losing control of my mirages?* The fact that the mirages existed was scary in itself, to think that they might start popping up around her was terrifying.

She shivered and tried to bring herself out of the mirage. The orange cat that had rushed past her started to fade in her vision and the colors melted back into place while she began to hear the chirp of birds and rustle of the trees again.

She released a long sigh. She needed to take care of this problem sooner than later, but who could help her? Mira? *No, she's injured and she would just think it was a joke. Painted? I have no idea how she'd react. Jump would just think I was insane...* She wished she could ask her mother and father, her heart started to ache with longing.

They'd know what to do... She felt the tears rise to her eyes, but then she stiffened. *No! I can't cry, that would mean I gave up hope. And I haven't! I'll keep fighting, and I will find them! I will see them again!*

Scorch lifted her head defiantly and strode forward beneath the dark pines. She jumped and dove for cover a second later as she heard voices coming from the nearby ShadowClan border. "Why do I have to hunt here? I'm RiverClan, not ShadowClan!" a high-pitched whining, annoyed voice filled her ears.

She flattened her ears as the voice rang painfully in her ears, *how could any cat stand that sound?* "Shut up and hunt!" a cat snarled in reply to the first cat. Scorch knew what she should do; she did in fact have the common sense to know that she should just leave as quietly as she could. But the emotions she heard spiked her curiosity and she had to see who it was.

Looking around, she darted out of the holly bush she'd hid in, pressing up against a tree near the border. Looking up, she saw the low-hanging branches, a perfect spying place. *But I've never climbed*

a tree before... She shrugged, she'd seen her mirages climbing trees, she knew how to.

She reached up with her unsheathed front claws, pulling herself up while using her sheathed back paws to grab the tree and push herself up. She was thankful that the herbs in her mouth muffled her grunts as she pulled herself up, muscles aching and breath panting as she wobbled on a covered pine branch.

Looking down, she willed herself not to faint as she looked down. There were four cats, two black cats, two non-black cats. Scorch didn't recognize any of them. The leader seemed to be an older looking lithe black she-cat with green eyes.

She was followed by the two colored cats, one was a lean gray tom with white paws and muzzle and blue eyes, well, eye, one of his eyes was swelled closed with a long scar over it. The other was a gray tabby she-cat with black ear-tips and green eyes. The patrol was concluded by a tall black tom with brown eyes.

"Shadow? Where are we even hunting?" the whiny voice came again, evidently from the gray tabby she-cat.

"Shut up! I'll tell you when we get there!" The leading black she-cat snarled again.

Scorch's ears flicked, her gaze kept being drawn to the gray tabby she-cat. There was something in her voice, she was trying to be annoying, and it was her way of being defiant. "*ShadowClan and RiverClan got it worse,*" she recalled Skypool's words. Was it really that much worse?

The patrol passed and scorch found no reason to remain in the tree. She carefully made her way down the tree, sprinting away from the border as soon as her paws touched the ground. She didn't ever want to meet the cats that lived there ever again.

She slowed only when she was within hearing distance of the den. "That kit is always wandering around, she has nothing but fluff in that head of hers, just once can't she do something right?!" she could hear Jump's irked mew before she saw the den through the

trees.

She couldn't decide if she should be offended by his remarks, are relieved that he was acting like himself again. He had been unnaturally quiet and looking constantly worried since Mira was injured. *I wonder how she felt this morning.*

It was quite a while past sun-high, so she'd assume Mira would have woken up by now. *And I can replace the poultice as soon as I get back*. "Sorry it took me so long," she mumbled as she walked into the small clearing.

"Scorch, once again you are late getting back," Painted growled from where she was sitting by Jump close enough to the den that they could see Mira.

Scorch looked up with wide, innocent, dark eyes. "But I didn't say when I'd get back, so I may as well be back exactly when I planned I would," she mewed around the herbs.

Painted narrowed her eyes, obviously unhappy with her back talk, but Scorch ignored her. "When did Mira wake up?" Scorch asked.

"She hasn't," Jump mewed, an edge to his voice.

"She didn't?" Scorch looked up, surprised.

"No, what did those seeds you gave her do?" Jump demanded.

Scorch frowned; *maybe I should have lessened the dose on the poppy seeds too...* "They just make her sleep, and numb pain," Scorch mewed. "But I guess she didn't need so many seeds last night," Scorch shrugged.

"Well? Aren't you going to give her something to make her better?" Jump pressed, looming over her.

"Why? I don't know what counters poppy seeds, besides; she'll just sleep them off. I'll just give her two instead of four tonight when she goes to sleep," Scorch shot back, wondering why he was freaking out. Sure, it wasn't so great that Mira wasn't awake to drink and eat, but she wouldn't die from sleep!

Actually, it'll be helpful that she's asleep when I reapply the ointment, I don't know how much it'll hurt. She went into the den and quickly whipped up the ointment, ignoring Jump's unhappy mutters. Carefully loosening the brace, she cleaned off the old ointment, and then used the fresh one, rubbing it on gently over the break.

Finishing, she cleaned her paws and then tightened the brace, making sure it was just as secure as it was before she'd loosened it. "Are you done?" Scorch jumped at Mira's sleepy murmur.

"Yes, when did you wake up?" Scorch asked; worried that she'd woken Mira up.

"Before you came in, don't worry. I was just too sleepy to say anything," Mira yawned. "And it hurt a little when you were doing whatever it was you were doing, so I couldn't fall back to sleep," Mira mewed, opening one of her hazy blue eyes.

"Do you feel alright?" Scorch asked, touching her nose to Mira's head. It didn't feel any warmer than it should be, meaning the fever was finally gone.

"Yeah, but I'm really hungry!" Mira moaned.

"Okay!" Scorch mewed, glad Mira could feel hungry.

"And thirsty!" Mira called after her as she left the den.

"Is there any prey left?" Scorch asked Jump and Painted as she left the den.

"Go catch you own! I'm tired," Jump growled, glaring down at her.

Scorch huffed, glaring at him in the eye for a moment until his ear twitched. "Mira is hungry, and thirsty," she mewed slowly and clearly, so that Jump couldn't possibly mishear.

"Why didn't you say so?!" Jump leaped to his paws and rushed off.

"I guess he wasn't that tired," Scorch sighed, sitting down with a sigh.

"Is Mira any better?" Painted asked, her head tilted up as she studied the sky.

"Her fever is gone and she was hungry, so it definitely seems she's getting better," Scorch mewed.

"How long until we can start travelling again? I want to leave the Clans as quick as I can," Painted asked.

Scorch was silent for a moment. "She just got over the fever, so I don't want to push her. But in a few days, she can probably start trying to do some exercises. But it would hurt a lot if she tried to move now. It's going to be at least a moon, though I'm thinking more like two or three, before she can walk on her own," Scorch admitted.

Painted let out a long sigh, her eyes closed tight and her mouth in a hard line, as if she was trying to not get angry. "Well, it can't be helped right now. But as soon as she can be moved, we're putting some distance between us and the Clan border. So you let me know when it's okay to move her," Painted mewed, staring down at her.

Scorch nodded, shriveling under Painted's gaze. "Good," Painted nodded and walked away. Scorch let out a sigh, *that cat is intense! If she finds out what I'm doing with the Clans she'll kill me!*

....

The next morning came. No, it was even before that when Scorch crawled out of the den. She looked back at the three snoring cats. She was worried about what Painted would say when she got back, but she couldn't think of a good enough excuse to leave so early. And she wasn't ready to tell them about what she was going to be doing just yet.

The gray light of pre-dawn looked cold and glistened on the white tipped grass. *Frost?* She'd heard Painted say that the first frost would be coming soon. But she had never seen it, though she felt it crunching under her paws and it burned her paws with cold.

She shivered as the cold air nipped at her nose with an icy edge

that hurt her lungs as she breathed it in. The forest was quiet, still asleep as she wandered through it, eyes wide and mouth open. She wasn't thinking like she usually did as she passed through the forest.

She was just watching, listening, waiting. She wanted to be fully aware when the world sprung to life. She crossed the river, having difficulty leaping across the gap, since she wasn't at the narrowest place. Her front paws hit the ground, but her back legs splashed in the water, sending droplets spraying against her fur.

As if that was the signal, a peal of gold sunlight broke over the horizon and a wind swept over the forest, her ears and tail flapping in the sudden gust of wind. A few steps more forward and the sound of birdsong filled the air.

She hurried to where she was supposed to meet with Leafpaw, she was supposed to be there right now. Luckily she arrived only a few minutes later with the sun not even half-way revealed yet. However, she felt a tad nervous as she saw Leafpaw sitting there, her tail twitching impatiently.

"I hope you are more punctual next time," Leafpaw mewed sternly, blue eyes looking down at her, allowing no argument.

Scorch just nodded; slightly unnerved that she couldn't sense Leafpaw's true emotions. "What are we going to do first?" Scorch asked.

"We are going to do some hunting; do you know how to hunt?" Leafpaw asked.

Scorch hesitated. "Kind of," she mewed, shuffling her paws, trying to decide how good her skills were.

"Kind of?" Leafpaw repeated, getting to her paws.

"Well, I can hunt, but not very well," Scorch mewed, looking at the ground. She'd never been unable to meet a cat's eye before. But the way Leafpaw seemed to be sizing her up was unnerving.

"Do you know how to stalk? How to scent prey? How to catch it?"

Leafpaw assaulted her with questions.

Scorch just shook her head, "No, not really I suppose."

"Then you don't know how to hunt and I will show you," Leafpaw mewed, leading her back over the border so they were out of ThunderClan territory. "This is a good spot to practice," Leafpaw mewed as they came to a stretch of path not crowded by shrubs.

"Show me how you crouch," Leafpaw ordered, turning toward her quickly.

Scorch dropped into the crouch Jump had showed her on those white sand beaches. "Hmm, not too bad, but keep your paws closer together and your legs stretched further apart," Leafpaw ordered, nudging her legs and paws into position.

Scorch frowned, it felt more difficult to move like this, but she did feel more balanced and in a better position to pounce. "Now stalk," Leafpaw ordered.

Scorch moved forward, trying to pad as quietly as she could. "No, no!" Leafpaw snapped. "You're lumbering all over the place! Who the heck taught you to hunt?!" Leafpaw growled.

"No one did," Scorch mewed, feeling hurt. She sat up and watched Leafpaw stalk forward, she stared as the red she-cat glided forward, perfectly balanced and silent even though she was moving much faster than Scorch had been.

"Wow! How did you do that?!" Scorch asked, forgetting about her hurt feelings.

"Weren't you watching?" Leafpaw asked, her blue eyes held a hint of amusement now and Scorch was relieved that Leafpaw wouldn't act so stiff all the time.

"Yeah, but I couldn't tell what you did differently," Scorch mewed.

"Crouch down and I'll show you again," Leafpaw mewed, crouching down next to her. "The trick is to keep a rhythm to your movements, if you're tripping over yourself to be quiet; you're just

going to make more noise. Also, walk on your toes if you can and pad as lightly as you can," Leafpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded, adjusting her movements and her eyes widened in amazement again as she felt and heard the improvement. "Much better," Leafpaw praised her.

Scorch looked up, pleased. "Now, that's just for mice, but I won't go into the others quite yet. Just practice that stalking some more so that you don't forget that," Leafpaw ordered.

Scorch stalked back and forth over the path until her legs ached from crouching so long and the sun was almost to the top of the treetops. "Okay, is that enough?" she asked, sitting up with her legs trembling.

"Yes, now to do it for real. Something to remember when hunting is where the prey will most likely be. It's pretty rare to just stumble across prey on the main trails. Most prey will be by their food sources or water, especially in this season," Leafpaw mewed.

"Why?" Scorch asked as Leafpaw led her into a different part of the forest.

"Because next season is leaf-bare, so all the animals are storing food for when there won't be any," Leafpaw explained.

"Why won't there be any food?" Scorch asked, feeling nervous about the idea of all the food disappearing.

"Well, there will be some, but not much, so all the animals find extra food right now. And that includes us," Leafpaw mewed. "Now, what can you smell?"

Scorch lifted her nose to the air; she smelled the forest scents, and maybe a distant prey scent, but mostly just the cold, sharp wind. "Open your mouth, it allows scents to flow more easily."

Scorch blinked, than opened her mouth. And she was once more amazed what a huge difference a tiny movement made. The scents flowed to her so quickly and clearly she almost felt overwhelmed. *Wait a moment.*

The scents were flowing away now, she had stimulated herself too much and the sounds and colors blurred and faded, even Leafpaw was just a hazy outline. Her mirages were much clearer. Several mirages jumped around her, hunting, playing, fighting.

No! I have to get back to Leafpaw! Focusing hard, she shut her eyes and focused on her paws, on feeling the ground beneath them again, instead of the sensation of being attached to it, as she had now. She let out a long breath and felt the world's movements sway back into her.

"Scorch?! What's wrong? Open your eyes!" she heard Leafpaw's panicking voice and forced her eyes open, seeing her red face and blue eyes again.

"I'm fine," Scorch sighed weakly, noticing for the first time that Leafpaw's ears and paws were paler red then the rest of her fur. The sunlight felt too bright and her body felt too heavy.

"What just happened? It looked like you had fainted, but you were still standing," Leafpaw mewed, confusion laced blandly in her voice.

"Never mind that," Scorch sighed, trying to recover the energy she had just lost. "I'm okay now."

"Hmm..." Leafpaw didn't look so sure, but she didn't seem willing to push the subject. "Okay, but tell me if something happens," Leafpaw ordered. Scorch nodded and they continued along the path in silence.

"Okay," Leafpaw whispered. "This is a beech tree, they grow mostly by water and they have lots of nuts, so they're good for finding prey at."

Scorch studied the tree, it was tall and its branches separated only three tail-lengths above the ground, spreading out and rising slowly. It was definitely the kind of tree she wouldn't forget easily.

"It looks really easy to climb," Scorch observed, a cat could easily walk along the branches without even using their claws.

"Yeah, but even clumsy animals like dogs can climb these to some extent, same with foxes, so it's not smart to climb this when getting away from animals," Leafpaw answered. "Well? Do you see any prey?"

Scorch stared, she didn't see anything at first, then noticed some shuffling under the leaves. "In the leaves," Scorch breathed, her paws tingling with hunter instincts.

"Stay calm," Leafpaw whispered in her ear.

Scorch forced herself to stay still, watching with wide eyes and unsheathed claws as one mouse edged closer to their hiding place. "When?" she asked.

"Not yet, now creep around, and don't step on anything," Leafpaw breathed, giving her a little nudge.

Scorch moved, low and silent, creeping around to come between the mouse and tree, in case it had a home in the roots. Holding her breath, she pounced, and the mouse was dead underpaw before it knew what had happened.

She went back to Leafpaw, her prey held firmly in her mouth. "Not bad, now it's my turn," Leafpaw mewed, leaving the hiding area. Scorch admired her catch while Leafpaw was gone, but almost too quickly, Leafpaw was back with a squirrel.

"Your turn again," Leafpaw nodded. Scorch blinked and looked up at her.

"But I can only eat this, I don't need anymore," Scorch mewed, slightly confused.

Leafpaw quirked a look at her. "In a Clan, cats hunt for the others before themselves, that's part of what makes us Clan cats," the apprentice looked at her.

Scorch looked at her paws, but she'd always been told to just hunt for herself. Was it wrong? Or did it not matter. *Maybe I'll just catch something for Mira, but then again, Jump always takes care of her. I have no reason to spend more time hunting.*

"Well, I'm not a real Clan cat," Scorch declared. "But, if you want me to keep hunting, you can take the rest of the prey I catch," Scorch offered.

Leafpaw looked at her in perplexity, and Scorch thought she might refuse. But then Leafpaw sighed and nodded, "Okay, you may not be a real Clan cat, but at least you're generous!"

Scorch nodded, grinning. But something stuck in her mind about that as she hunted. *A real Clan cat? I don't want that, do I? I want to find my parents. But... for some reason, I want to be considered a Clan cat. Just once.*

Chapter 14: In The Shadows

Chapter 14: In The Shadows

Willowwater yawned and rolled over from where she lay on the cold, almost muddy, ground. It was something she was not sure she could get used to. The smell of ShadowClan had never been pleasant either, and the mixed scent of ShadowClan and rogues, had tainted the lovely smell of RiverClan.

I should be used to it by now, though. She thought, looking up at the pine-covering that blocked out the sky. She shivered, unable to relax when the sky was blocked from view. *I hate this all!*

Frustration and helplessness mixed with misery was forever on her tongue, tainting everything she said. It had also slowly made its way to her mind and now everything she thought was bitter and sharp, also pessimistic. She closed her eyes and tried to feel the way she used to, back in RiverClan, fishing with her friends. Happy and at ease. It brought up another memory.

Rainstone... A cat that had been a little too important in her life. The dark gray she-cat with the darker blue eyes flitted like a hazy shadow in her mind. It came with a sting of hurt and a sensation of wonder. She sighed and opened her eyes, staring between her paws at the pine needle ground.

She'd never really been able to push away the feeling that Rainstone had abandoned her, abandoned the Clans. She shook her head, she knew why Rainstone had left, understood how she'd felt; but that didn't make it any easier.

What did you expect?! She berated herself harshly, *Rainstone was a rogue! She had no attachment to the Clans, and she was expecting kits! She'd given us plenty of warning, its not like she could think up some genius idea to save us from this mess anyways.*

Regret pooled in her belly, cold and sickening. *If only we'd listened*

back then... of only Sunstar hadn't wanted to not fight, this wouldn't have happened. But now Sunstar was dead, along with most of the Clan, her closest friends were dead too. And she was stuck living in this swampy, stinky forest.

At least the ShadowClan cats didn't have to leave their home. Not that she envied the ShadowClan cats, most of their cats had been slaughtered in battle, at least a few RiverClan cats had escaped, probably turned rogue. But she hadn't even been lucky enough to do that.

"Willowwater! Are you out here moping again?" She looked up from her brooding to see Creekshade, a former RiverClan warrior like herself. She looked at Creekshade with sympathy, the black she-cat had been saved by her black fur, but none of her three kits had been so lucky. Creekshade's dark green eyes looked permanently haunted by her young kit's screams as Nightwing murdered them in front of her eyes.

Willowwater supposed she should count herself lucky that she was one of the few captured non-black Clan cats that Nightwing had chosen to let live. Not that this life was really worth living anyways.

"Flickertail wanted to see you," Creekshade mewed, her voice sparking her back to reality.

She gave a growled mutter. Flickertail had been RiverClan's medicine-cat, and for whatever reason, Nightwing had allowed him to live and teach Nightshade, a black rouge who would be the one and only medicine-cat when her training was done. Willowwater couldn't help wondering what would happened to Flickertail when he was no longer needed.

Willowwater padded through the forest to the ShadowClan camp. Oh, sorry, the *Night*Clan camp, she knew she'd never really accept the name though, like most cats. She paused outside the camp entrance. She hated going in, she actually wasn't allowed to sleep or eat inside the camp, she lived a little ways from this camp with the rest of her former RiverClan colleagues who didn't have black fur.

The camp was for black-furred members only. She still couldn't

understand why Nightwing was so engrossed with black fur. *Talk about a major ego...*

But she was more worried about meeting one of Nightwing's cronies than the monster himself inside the camp. They were the ones that would beat up on her and harass her if she met them, at least Nightwing would know why she was there and wouldn't bother her as long as she didn't mess around.

Taking in a deep breath, she thought of Rainstone, drawing courage from the thought of how much her friend had put herself through to try to save them. *But in the end, it didn't matter. Everything she did faded into shadows as the failure of the endeavor outweighed the effort.*

She slunk through the entrance, pressed as tightly against the barrier as she could be without being inside it. The camp was quiet at the moment; meaning Nightwing wasn't making one of his speeches about how black-furred cats were born to rule, and the others were born to serve.

Rebellious feeling stirred in her, but she never had any idea what to do with them, so she just smothered them. She quickly crossed the clearing, stiffening when she saw Shale. The black tom was one of Nightwing's cronies and was always the first to pick on the 'under warriors,' as they'd been labeled.

But she was relieved that he was talking to Amelia, one of the few black cats that Willowwater could stand to be around. It was no secret that Shale had a soft spot for the softer she-cat. Actually, Amelia never took advantage of her higher status and was one of the few rogue warriors that engaged in conversation with the under-warriors.

Willowwater had actually learned that Amelia had once been a kittypet, then turned rogue, before somehow getting mixed-up in Nightwing's plots. It puzzled Willowwater to no end that such a nice cat could still support Nightwing.

But she couldn't think of that now, she'd just spotted another danger. Crowpelt, in her opinion, he was the worst of Nightwing's crew. He had earned that right by being a former WindClan warrior

that had abandoned his Clan after they'd been captured by Pinefur and sold himself to Nightwing.

She couldn't keep the look of disgust off her face, she hated everything about that cat who would sell his Clan-mates to an awful fate while running away to live it up. At least she hadn't expected better of rogues, but for a Clan-cat to act like a rogue in the worst way possible just made her sick.

She quickened her pace, diving into the safety of the medicine-cat den before they crossed paths. She was also relived that Nightshade wasn't there at the moment. Although Nightshade wasn't really mean... she did have a short temper and a sharp tongue ready for under-warriors, though Willowwater knew she avoided using her claws for correcting.

"Flickertail? You wanted to see me?" she asked, looking at the tom whose tail whipped back and forth to live up to his name.

"Willowwater," Flickertail mewed, turning his face toward her. Willowwater shivered at the wild look in his amber eyes. She hadn't seen him look like that for awhile.

"What is it?" she asked in a lowered voice, knowing this was important. She could sense it in her belly, and she couldn't decide whether to be hopeful or worried.

"I had a dream," Flickertail started, looking worried but slightly more calm.

"From StarClan?" Willowwater asked hopefully. She'd never really thought of her ancestors, until the Clans had been conquered, then she'd thought about them an awful lot.

"Yes, it was Rosewing who came to me," Flickertail mewed.

"Rosewing?" Willowwater repeated, thinking the name sounded familiar.

"Yes, you remember, right? In the elders stories? She was a hero deputy in RiverClan who saved the Clans from several disasters, before losing her own life to save a kit," Flickertail offered the quick

explanation.

"Well, what did she say?" Willowwater demanded impatiently, black ears twitching.

"She told me the Clans are close to the time to rebel," Flickertail murmured.

"Really?!" Willowwater thought she'd never heard something so good. But, it sounded too good to be true, the hope in her belly didn't rise past her heart to get to her mind.

"She told me that first we'd need to find the Fire of Spirit first, though," Flickertail murmured.

"What is that?" Willowwater demanded. *Fire of Spirit? What? Huh?! Spirit won't win battles and fire just destroys everything!*

Flickertail sighed and shook his head, "She didn't say, but we need to find it. It's our last hope," he sounded desperate.

Willowwater stared at him, *a Fire of Spirit? How are we even supposed to find something like that in these shadows? And how will that help us now?*

ThunderClan/WindClan

Leader: Pinefur- Copper-brown tom with green eyes

Thunderclan Deputy: Goat- Shaggy dirty white tom with yellow eyes

WindClan Deputy: Spark-Red she-cat with gold paws and blue eyes

ThunderClan Medicine-cat: Skypool- Silver-blue she-cat with darker gray-blue patches and white paws with green eyes

WindClan Medicine-cat: Willowleaf-Red she-cat with black stripes and green eyes

WARRIORS:

Spider- Brown tom with long legs and white underbelly, blue eyes(Thunder)

Moss- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes(Thunder)

Flick- Black tom with long tail and brown eyes(Thunder)

Molt- Brown tom with darker paws and ears and blue eyes(Thunder)

Thorn- Big, golden brown tom with blue eyes(Thunder)

Brighty- Bright yellow she-cat with green eyes(Thunder)

Coil- Black she-cat with twisted tail and yellow eyes(Thunder)

Bee- White tom with gold tabby stripes and blue eyes(Thunder)

Sunny- Bright gold she-cat with white paws and amber eyes(Thunder)

Paige- Cream she-cat with faint orange ringed tail and ears, blue eyes(Thunder)

Muddle- Dark brown tom with brown eyes(Wind)

Kit- Pale red she-cat with green eyes(Wind)

Wildeye- Lanky black tom with wide, bright yellow eyes(Wind)

Grease- Olive brown tom with pale brown eyes(Wind)

Snow- White and silver molted she-cat with amber eyes(Wind)

Egg- Off-white tom with blue eyes(Wind)

Prickle- Spiky sandy-brown she-cat with green eyes(Wind)

Bat- Thick, short-furred black she-cat with amber eyes(Wind)

Poppy- Yellow and brown she-cat with blue eyes(Wind)

Clam- Silver furred tom with pale yellow eyes(Wind)

SECOND-CLASS WARRIORS

Sunstorm- Ginger tom with green eyes(Thunder)

Icewhisker- Light gray tom with blue eyes(Thunder)

Spiritstorm- Silver tabby she-cat with ice blue eyes(Thunder)

Leopardspot-Golden she-cat with black spots and green eyes(Thunder)

Wispheart-Dainty, storm-gray she-cat with lighter paws and ears; blue-gray eyes(Thunder)

Frostshine- Pale gray she-cat with white paws, tail-tip, belly, and face with blue eyes(Wind)

Flightfrost- Muscular, dark brown tabby tom with ice blue eyes(Wind)

Cavepath- Brown tom with dark gray streaks and green eyes(Wind)

Jumpblaze- Ginger tom with white stripe from between his eyes to his tail-tip and blue eyes(Wind)

Bouncepelt- Orange and white tom with amber eyes(Wind)

Redleap- Ginger she-cat with long tail and orange eyes(Wind)

APPRENTICES:

Firepaw- Ginger tom with green eyes(Thunder)

Leafpaw- Red she-cat with paler ears and paws and blue eyes(Thunder)

Deerpaw- Skinny, tan colored she-cat with white spots and blue eyes(Wind)

QUEENS:

Applefang- Skinny, tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes(Thunder)
Mate- Hawkstrike

Ivyfur- Silver tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes(Thunder) Mate- Icewhisker

Mothbreeze- Tall, light brown she-cat with amber eyes(Wind) Mate- Cavepath

KITS:

Moonkit- Dark gray she-kit with ice blue eyes(Applefang)

Boulderkit- Stone gray tom with blue eyes(Applefang)

Ravenkit- Black she-kit with amber eyes(Ivyfur)

Gorsekit- Gold-brown tom with brown eyes(Ivyfur)

Featherkit- Silver she-kit with amber eyes(Mothbreeze)

ShadowClan/RiverClan (NightClan)

Leader: Nightwing- Black tom with brown paws and brown eyes

Medicine-cat:Nightshade- Black she-cat with heather-blue eyes. Former rogue with knowledge of herbs.

Second Medicine-cat: Flickertail- Red-brown tom with cream dappled spots and amber eyes(Former RiverClan)

WARRIORS:

Shadow- Lithe black she-cat with green eyes

Felix- Tall, skinny black tom with crumpled ears and green eyes

Soot- Black she-cat with dark hazel eyes

Jet- Lanky black tom with brown eyes

Crowpelt- Black tom with green eyes(former WindClan)

Slate- Small black she-cat with blue eyes

Raven- Long-legged black she-cat with amber eyed

Shale- Large black tom with one white paw and blue eyes

Shade- Black tom with silver paws and gray eyes

Amelia- Long-furred black she-cat with amber eyes

Wing- Small black she-cat with brown eyes

Crow- Lanky black tom with dim gray eyes

Jack- Black tom with white back paws and blue eyes

Snake- Slinky black tom with a long tail and dark amber eyes

Rita- Black she-cat with white ears and front paws and blue eyes

Hawk- Black tom with brown paws and yellow eyes

Shadowripple- Black she-cat with faint stripes and green eyes(Former ShadowClan)

Crowclaw- Black tom with pointed ears and amber eyes(Former ShadowClan)

Shadebreeze- Black she-cat with gray, curling stripes and gray-green eyes(Former ShadowClan)

Creekshade- Black she-cat with dark green eyes(Former RiverClan)

UNDER WARRIORS:

Silverwing- Silver-blue tom with gray eyes(Shadow)

Frogfoot- Wide-pawed murky-brown tom with green eyes(Shadow)

Newtlight- Ginger, white, tawny, and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes(Shadow)

Thistlebranch- White, gray-brown, dull ginger tortoiseshell she-cat

with blue eyes(Shadow)

Webclaw- Wiry gray tom with white paws, muzzle and blue eyes(River)

Sweetberry- Honey-gold she-cat with green eyes(River)

Cedarheart- Orange tom with blue eyes(River)

Willowwater- Gray tabby with black ear-tips and green eyes(River)

APPRENTICES:

Flashpaw- Black she-cat with shimmering, soft fur and bright gray eyes(River)

QUEENS:

Storm- Black she-cat with stormy blue eyes. Mate- Shade

KITS:

Fling- Black tom with a long, white-tipped tail and blue eyes(Storm)

Swish- Long-legged black she-cat with green eyes(Storm)

ROGUES

Jump- Small white tom with frizzy whiskers and a half torn ear, sharp green eyes

Mira- Small, tabby gray she-cat with amber eyes

Painted- Long-legged cream she-cat with white, black, and orange spots and bright green eyes

Scorch- Tiny red-orange molted she-kit with three black spots and dark green eyes

STARCLAN/ANCESTORS

Song- Tall, black she-cat with amber eyes

Rosewing- Pale red she-cat with dark brown paws and darker brown eyes. (Former RiverClan Deputy)

Seedtail- Brown tabby tom with hazy blue eyes. (Former ThunderClan Medicine-cat)

Softpaw- Pale gray she-cat with odd orange markings and cloudy blue eyes. (Former WindClan Apprentice)

Smokepool- Silver tom with black ears and hazel eyes. (Former ShadowClan Warrior)

Chapter 15: Tainted

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Scorch yawned, the cold air nipped at her exposed face and she wrapped her tail around her nose to try to stay warm. Soon she faced the inevitable and decided to get up, knowing she wouldn't fall back to sleep in this chill. She looked around the dim den, unsatisfied with the shallow gorse walls that let in more then a few cracks of light and air.

She missed their old den that they'd left just two days ago, and more specifically, her warm moss nest. The cold ground seemed to suck up all her warmth and made sleeping almost an impossibility. But Painted had been adamant about moving further from Clan territory as soon as Mira could be moved. And so move they did.

Though to Scorch, they'd only moved further from the ShadowClan border, but were still just as close to the ThunderClan border, making it just as easy to get there in time for training with Leafpaw. It had already been one whole moon since she'd started, and, honestly, it was going better then she could have hoped for.

Her days had fallen into the schedule of training with Leafpaw at dawn, getting back at sun-high, and then either collecting herbs or sometimes doing training exercises with Painted in the afternoon. She was well aware that Pained and Jump were highly suspicious of her going out early and staying out so long, but neither had pressed her very much after the first few times.

I guess they're just happy I'm busy and I'm coming back with food most of the time. She thought, getting up and exiting the den, proceeding to follow the new route to the border. At least now she didn't need to cross the stream. Not that is was a problem to cross anymore, she'd grown in the last moon, her legs were longer, her muscles more developed.

And not just physically had she changed, even though she still

wasn't very strong when it came to fighting, she had found ways to use her now superior speed and wit to win fights. She was even coming close to beating Leafpaw in a few mock battles.

That was another thing, although she wouldn't say she and Leafpaw were particularly close, their mindsets were really just too different for that, Scorch felt a strong bond of trust and assurance between them. They were different, they knew it, but they wouldn't hesitate to count on the other for anything.

Scorch gave a side-long glance as a white cat rolled around on the ground, the flower patch was now brown and wilted as the cold season, leaf-bare as Leafpaw called it, grew closer. But to her mirage it was evidently full and flowering.

My mirages are getting stronger... but I still have no idea what to do with them! The familiar sense of helplessness and fearful desperation churned in her belly. She tried her best not to think about it, but her mirages were appearing more and more often. In fact, unless she was focused on a physical act or sleeping, she could usually spot one of them around her.

But it was harder to notice now, since the colors didn't fade so much and the sounds didn't dull quite so greatly either. It made her fear the line between her mirages and reality was slowly dissolving. But how do you fix something,when you don't know what it is? And she hadn't seen Song lately either, so there was no way to ask her.

Who do I turn to? She wasn't sure, she didn't know, and she didn't even know what she would say if she was to talk to a cat about this. But she was at the border now, the cold day dawned gray and cloudy. Pale, icy-gray light shone on her fur and the frosted grass and ferns, making them glow ghostly white.

She looked around for Leafpaw, not seeing the familiar red she-cat. *Odd... She's usually here before me, no matter how early I get up.* It was as if Leafpaw always knew precisely when she'd be at the border, so that the apprentice knew just when to get there so that she could tease her about being lazy.

But this time, Scorch was there first, and it was slightly worrisome.

Her suspicion increased as she heard a rustle off to the side of her. Crouching, she slid into a holly bush that veiled her from view while allowing her to look around discreetly.

There, a pair of unfamiliar gray ears betrayed the presence of an intruder just over the rogue border. She tensed, recalling all Painted and Leafpaw had taught her in regards to fighting. She also realized she was unconsciously recalling all she'd seen her mirages do when they fought. Especially the slighter built ones.

With a quick leap, she erupted from the holly bush, lunging low and long over the ground to hit the strange cat low in the belly, rolling under the larger cat while effectively tackling them. Her developing technique in fighting consisted mostly on unbalancing and tripping her opponent up. A much easier thing to do then to knock them over with strength.

"Guh, I knew there was some cat sneaking about!" the cat she had tackled was growling as he shifted around. But Scorch was on her paws already, paws pressed down strategically on the tom cat's back. Her front paws pinned his shoulder and alternate foreleg firmly to the ground.

"Who are you?" Scorch demanded, thinking he was slightly familiar.

"I know you!" the pinned cat grumbled. "You're that rogue kit that came looking for mys sister a moon ago."

The words sank down and it clicked for Scorch, "What was your name... Blizzardkit?" she pondered, trying to remember the name of the smug kit that had said one thing and done another. She definitely didn't think about him with fondness for the trick he had pulled.

"It was Boulderkit! And now, its Boulderpaw, I'm an apprentice, so let me up!" he demanded, his voice was still grumbling but it was calm. In fact, thinking back, he hadn't seemed panicked for a moment, even though she had appeared almost out of nowhere and pinned him before he could even get a look at her.

She wondered if it was courage that allowed him to do that. She got

off of him and faced him, still light on her toes. She wouldn't fight him again, she'd lost all advantages anyways, but if he retaliated; she'd run. "Your fur still looks messy," Boulderpaw pointed out, observing her with a reserved air.

Scorch sized him up, not liking how he was scrutinizing her. Tilting her head back defiantly to look him fiercely in the eye. "Why are you here? Over the border?"

"Actually," Boulderpaw twitched his ear, "We are now on ThunderClan territory," he nodded just behind her.

Scorch felt herself flush with embarrassment as she realized he was right, her attack had sent them back over the border. She stiffly stepped back a few paces until she was over the border. She looked at Boulderpaw, he seemed different then the shifty eyed kit she'd seen just last moon. His stone gray fur was the same, his slightly stagnant blue eyes were the same color.

But the look was different, the sense she was getting from him was different. Last time she'd gotten the feeling he liked deceiving others, but now, she was sensing from him... *apathy*. No, that wasn't quiet right, he didn't look like he didn't care. But it seemed he only cared about one thing. Although Scorch didn't have a clue what it was, she certainly wasn't the thing he was concerned with.

"When did you become an apprentice?" Scorch asked, deciding to get him talking in the hopes of accomplishing the goal set by her curiosity; to know what he was concerned with.

"One moon ago," Boulderpaw continued to stare at her stolidly, giving the sense that he was both staring right through her, and staring right into her. It was unnerving, and Scorch shuddered inwardly under his predator sharp gaze.

But she wasn't giving up. "Is your sister an apprentice too?" she asked, referring to Moonkit, or Moonpaw.

"Of course," Boulderpaw continued in the same droning voice.

"You said you knew there was some cat sneaking about, is that why

you came here?" Scorch pressed.

Now she saw a spark of interest in Boulderpaw's eyes. "Yes, actually, I thought it was someone else though. But it was just you," the tinge of emotion dropped from his tone.

"Sorry I'm so disappointing," Scorch mewed, getting slightly frustrated, but even more intrigued.

"I'm sorry too. Now if you excuse me, I have some place to be," Boulderpaw mewed, turning and padding off at a pace that was neither slow, nor hinted at urgency.

What a strange cat... As she reflected on the conversation, the familiar scent of Leafpaw touched her nose and she pushed the chance encounter to the back of her mind. "Sorry for the delay, I had some work to finish up at camp from last night," Leafpaw greeted her.

"Its okay, I haven't been waiting very long," *and I was plenty occupied anyways,* she added mentally.

"Well, lets do some hunting, sound good? Then we can practice some tree climbing, you're still a little slow in navigating from branch to branch," Leafpaw mewed, leading her over the rogue border where they always went.

"How's Moonkit doing?" Scorch asked, the encounter with Boulderpaw had stirred up old thoughts. She'd kind of put Moonkit from her mind after she'd attacked her, but she hadn't completely forgotten about the cat that had first brought her here.

"She's Moonpaw now, and she's doing fine, well, as fine as she's ever been," Leafpaw shrugged.

"Has she tried to leave?" Scorch asked, recalling how Moonkit, pardon, Moonpaw, hadn't wanted to return to the Clans and had expressed desire to leave as soon as she was able.

Leafpaw looked at her quickly, "She talks an awful lot about leaving when we're in the den together, but she hasn't made a move regarding that," the elder apprentice mewed, looking back at the

trail.

Scorch looked up, noticing a flash of gold on a slightly faded brown backdrop. "Leafpaw? Do you see anything up there?" she asked, nodding at the gold cat.

"No, do you see prey?" Leafpaw asked, peering upward but evidently not witnessing what Scorch saw.

"I just thought I saw something," Scorch brushed it off, her heart beating slightly faster as she watched the mirage leap about the tree.

"There's a mouse, can you get it?" Leafpaw challenged, nodding at the mouse that was out in the open. Scorch nodded, recognizing the challenge of open space hunting. She crouched down and expertly stalked around until she was downwind.

Usually in these situations, Leafpaw had her scare the mouse toward her. But every now and then Leafpaw challenged her to make the catch alone. It was difficult to move fast enough to make a successful catch like this, but she'd managed it three of the five times she'd attempted.

She crept forward cautiously, slowly separating herself from the shield of the undergrowth. She moved slowly, one with the scenery in opposition to a mishap of landscape. Her breath whispered out, her paws slid forward through the fallen leaves, as quiet as one could be. Her movements blending into the sound of the rustling trees.

She could see more of her mirages appearing out of the corner of her eyes as she became more immersed in nature. But she had grown accustomed to keeping her wits about her when this happened, instead of growing numb like she used to.

She crawled forward even slower, the mouse's twitching nose and quivering whiskers was telling her it was on the verge of sensing her. But she leaped, her paws skimming the tops of the brown leaves. And she had it, sitting up proudly with the limp mouse in her grasp.

"Nicely done," Leafpaw mewed. Scorch rubbed her ear, annoyed that voices were dimmer while the rustling of the leaves on the trees sounded just as loud as thunder, if not louder. *I hope this never happens when there's a storm.*

But she took a moment to appreciate how well her hunting skills had developed under Leafpaw's instruction. She also thanked her memory, for memorizing everything Leafpaw told her. She knew her memory was much better than most, and that it had allowed her to improve very quickly. Especially since she also memorized everything her mirages did, and they did a lot.

They continued hunting until they both had three pieces for them to take back with them. "Excellent, now some tree climbing, and then I need to get back," Leafpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded, following Leafpaw to a sprawling oak tree. "Hey, I don't think I ever asked, but why don't you ever have any duties in the morning?" Scorch asked. Leafpaw had told her enough about Clan-life that she could envision it, so it puzzled her why she didn't have any duties in the morning.

"I do have duties, but its just hunting, and I do that with you," Leafpaw explained. "My mentor is pretty lax about letting me do what I want," Leafpaw shrugged, "That's what happens when your mentor is a rogue-warriors."

"But don't you ever go on patrols?" Scorch asked.

"Pinefur forbids apprentices to go on border patrols, he says it makes the Clan look weak," Leafpaw growled, her tail twitching.

"No, it doesn't!" Scorch exclaimed indignantly, puzzled by this reasoning by Pinefur. "It just shows that the Clan is growing! Young cats don't stay young forever, besides, isn't experience important?"

"Its not my choice, its Pinefur's, and that's it," Leafpaw mewed.

"If he's so awful, why don't you just overthrow him?" Scorch asked in an almost accusing tone as she voiced a question she'd thought over for a long time.

Leafpaw sighed, "I told you before, he's too strong. Besides, it'd be very risky to do since its almost leaf-bare and there won't be any new herbs to use," Leafpaw looked upset but Scorch was getting annoyed.

"It works the other way around too, you know. But there's something you're overlooking, without the Clan-cats cooperation, the Clan won't run, right? The Clan-cats do most of the hunting and work around the camp, so without you, it'd all fall apart, wouldn't it?" Scorch pointed out.

Leafpaw glanced at her sharply, "But then we'd be kicked out or beaten, and if we were kicked out, then we wouldn't have a home," Leafpaw snapped.

"But if you all refused, Pinefur would be forced to make compensations," Scorch debated.

"Yeah, he'd be forced to act, like threatening to kill the kits. He would do that," Leafpaw growled.

"But-"

"Shut up! You don't understand how the Clans work, you don't know what you're saying," Leafpaw snapped. "I can't work with you right now, I'll see you tomorrow," Leafpaw sighed and turned back toward where they'd just left their prey.

Scorch paused, confused and flustered. *What is with these cats? They complain all day long about how awful things are now that Pinefur has taken over. But none of them are willing to take a risk and change something! What are they waiting for?*

She started forward, this was a question she doubted would be answered. *And it doesn't concern me anyways, I'll be gone in two moons, I'll be searching for my home. I'll be taking a risk and changing things for me.*

It was a wonderful thought that she'd be able to finally go home, after almost two moons of being away from her family. She needed her memory refreshed, for she was forgetting what her parents

smelled like, what they sounded like, what they looked like. But she could still feel their warm fur, that was something she could not forget.

She sighed and stopped again, the wind blew around her, chasing the leaves along the ground. What was she doing? Lecturing Leafpaw about not taking action, she wasn't taking action either! She wasn't doing anything about her mirages, just feeling frightened. She wasn't doing anything about finding her parents, she hadn't even asked Leafpaw if she knew anything about where they lived, even though Leafpaw knew of them, or at least her mother.

Maybe... every cat here just becomes tainted by each other, they all fall into a pool of feelings that remains stagnant. She forced herself to walk forward and grab the prey she had caught before heading off. She didn't head straight to the den, wanting extra time to her thoughts.

Her mind raced, thoughts and images flashing through her mind. She'd lost her ideals. Her thoughts had changed, her motives had changed. *No, all I want is to get back home to my family! That's it!* But was it really that simple? Did the situation in the Clans not affect her at all? Did Painted and the others opinions not affect her?

But if I'm not affected by my surroundings, does that make me strong or weak? There was nothing Scorch hated more then unanswered questions. And right now, she had more then ever before. *Then... maybe I should make them answered.*

She took that last thought as her resolve, although she had no idea how she would answer these questions. She paused, a vibration tickling her senses. *What is that?* She didn't hear anything, didn't smell anything...but she could feel it.

She dropped the prey in a holly bush and cautiously proceeded toward where the vibration was edging louder. Now she could hear it, and smell it. *Boulderpaw! And... ShadowClan cats?* It smelled like the black cats she had encountered before but not as heavy ShadowClan smelling.

She could hear muffled struggles and she moved faster, pausing as

she came to the border, right where ThunderClan territory changed to ShadowClan. She followed the line straight down, all the while wondering what she was thinking doing this.

She could see glimpses of cats now, two black cats had Boulderpaw on the ground, kicking and jeering him while inflicting light, but painful, injuries. Scorch hesitated, energy tingling in her paws. But she couldn't fight off two grown cats by herself.

We'll just have to run for it. Betting on making a quick escape, Scorch launched herself out with a wild screech, effectively startling the two black cats into a stupor as she slashed their ears, using her speed to keep them lame for a few moments longer.

She quickly rolled Boulderpaw to his paws and, grabbing his scruff and dragging him on his paws. They were a few tail-lengths away before the two black cats were chasing them. "Just run!" Scorch hissed at Boulderpaw as he came to his senses.

"We should stop and fight!" Boulderpaw growled.

"Don't be stupid! We can't win this fight!" Scorch hissed, giving him a quick glare for his idiocy. "Just run!"

"You're not getting past me!" a cat growled form in front of them, one of the black cats stepping in their path.

"See! We should have fought!" Boulderpaw spat, slowing down.

"What did I say?! Keep running!" Scorch hissed back, speeding up.

"What? Are you insane?" Boulderpaw growled, his ears flattening.

"Maybe just a little," Scorch smirked.

Boulderpaw was panting too much to talk now, and Scorch was glad; she was feeling out of breath as well from the sprinting. They were almost on top of the black cat now, who seemed perplexed as to why they hadn't stopped or changed direction.

Scorch had been fully aware that the two black cats were situating themselves so that escape to ThunderClan territory was impossible.

But the ShadowClan border was wide open.

"Turn right when I say now," Scorch wheezed, hoping Boulderpaw heard. From the look he gave her, he had heard her. "Now!" Scorch snapped, skidding her paws around the right corner that was half-blocked by a bramble bush. The black cats wouldn't know what they'd done for a few moments, so they could make their getaway.

The trees turned to the familiar pines and the air stilled just as she was used to. Boulderpaw seemed greatly unnerved though as they continued racing through the dark forest. "I think we lost them," Scorch panted, slowing down and gasping in breaths.

"That would be good, if we weren't now stuck in their territory!" Boulderpaw snapped irritably. Scorch glanced at him, her whiskers twitching as she saw the life in his eyes. He looked so much different from when she'd talked to him before. Almost a different cat entirely.

"Well, maybe you should consider begin quiet then," Scorch advised, stretching out her legs and looking around. From the fresh smell in the wind, they were near the lake, and right in the middle of the territory. "Now climb," she ordered.

"What?" Boulderpaw stared at her, eyes narrowed. The spark of life was fading fast, and he was looking more forlorn again. She didn't want to argue with a cat in that state of mind.

"I know where we are and where we need to go, I'm in charge right now. So if I say, 'climb!,' you do it!" Scorch ordered, nudging him up a tree and scampering along behind him.

"What are we doing up here?" Boulderpaw growled.

"Shush!"

They waited a few moments and Boulderpaw was looking ready to ask a question again when three black cats appeared beneath them. "Where did they go? I lost their scent not long after we crossed the border, they must have been moving fast!" that was one of the black cats from the border.

Its because I had us run through every mushroom patch I could find, Scorch congratulated herself on that stroke of genius.

"Its odd that they ran into our territory though," the speaker was a small black she-cat with blue eyes that she'd never seen before. But she recognized the tall black tom with her as the one who had been on the patrol a while ago.

"Were they both Clan-cats?" the black tom asked the cat from the border. It was a black tom with brown paws and yellow eyes.

"No, I don't think so. The one we found snooping around was definitely a Clan-cat, and while we were teaching him a lesson, a small little cat came out of nowhere, bright red with dark, wild eyes! I thought it was a demon for a moment, but I think it must have been some crazed rogue kit," the tom mewed.

Scorch grumbled to herself silently. She did not look like a demon or a crazed rogue! So maybe her eyes were a little big and dark, so what if her fur wouldn't lie flat? It didn't make her a freak of nature. *Though my mirages probably could put me in that category.*

She caught an amused side-long glance from Boulderpaw. He was just begging her to knock him out of the tree. And if he said anything, she would.

The three cats passed, mumbling something about putting a watch on the ThunderClan border. "So, how do we get out?" Boulderpaw asked.

Scorch thought for a moment, "Its not really that difficult," she yawned, standing up and stretching with her claws curling into the wood. "But you have to agree to do exactly what I tell you, no questions asked," she mewed, looking down at him with narrowed eyes.

Boulderpaw met her gaze, thinking for a few moments in silence before he sighed, blue eyes falling back to a dull look that Scorch found irksome. "Fine, you're in charge."

Don't look so happy about it, Scorch though, thinking she'd just had

to help the worst Clan-cat of them all. *How did this even happen in the first place?*

Chapter 16: Just A Game

Chapter 16: Just A Game

Scorch grunted as she pulled herself up by her forepaws. "Let me help you," grumbled Boulderpaw from where he was already standing on the branch.

Scorch stiffened in indignation as he grabbed her scruff and pulled her up. "I didn't ask for help," her voice was defensive and wary. She didn't like that she couldn't tell what he was feeling neither from his actions nor words.

Boulderpaw just stared at her unwaveringly, making her already prickly fur bristle uncomfortably. "Then find us some other way to move around then from tree-jumping," he, at last, answered.

Scorch flicked her tail. "ShadowClan cats prefer the ground, the branches are too high for them to climb quickly. So we're safe at the moment. We wouldn't be if we were on the ground," Scorch huffed in defense of her decision.

Boulderpaw yawned, "We're not moving very quickly though, how far are we from the ThunderClan border?" asked he.

Scorch looked up at him with narrowed eyes. It irked her that her head only reached the bottom of his chin, making her look up at him. It made it rather difficult to convey any authority even though he had submitted to her orders to some degree.

But as much as he made her feel annoyed and, yes, slightly frightened, sympathy and compassion to whatever had made him like this still swelled beneath those passing emotions. "At the moment, we're heading to the lake, so I can get a better idea of where we are and decide which way is easiest to go," Scorch told him, expecting to see a flash of impatience in his eyes, but nothing came. He just nodded slowly, his jaw set in a slightly harder line.

"Lets get moving then, its almost dusk and ShadowClan has the advantage at night," his voice was drained of all emotion so that it fell flat at her paws.

"Then, please, move along," Scorch mewed, covering her nervousness with impatience. She flicked her spiky red tail and looked down. She gripped the branch tighter with her paws as she felt the pull of an invisible force trying to knock her to the ground far below her.

In reality, they were only probably maybe twelve tail-lengths above the ground, a survivable distance to fall, but one that would still be injurious. *Just don't look down, don't look down,* she calmed her suddenly heavy beating heart and steadied the dizziness that rushed to her head.

I'm not scared, she told herself, *I don't mind being up high. I just don't like falling.* She wondered if this fear was a result of the nightmarish night she'd lived when she'd fallen down the cliff path into the water and been separated from her family.

She focused on walking behind Boulderpaw who navigated the tree with a nimbleness she envied. "We'll cross here, but we need to jump a little," she observed, judging how hard it'd be to make the tail-length leap. Most of the trees overlapped so they just needed a little hop, but this would be an actual jump, even if it was small.

"I'll go first," Boulderpaw mewed instantly, tucking his legs beneath him for a moment and then springing out, landing on the bouncing branch with room to spare. "Now come on," he demanded. *Great, now I have no choice.*

Scorch took a deep breath, steadying her nerves as well she could as she gathered energy into her shaky limbs. She inched forward to the end of the branch, making the shortest distance possible for her to leap. *Now!*

She leaped, mouth twisted anxiously and forepaws outstretched. For a moment, she felt herself soaring and she forgot to be afraid, and then she was falling and the fear rushed into her like a solid wall. "Enguh!" she reached out, trying to grab the branch beneath her.

No! Fear froze her mind for a moment as her paws skimmed over the branch, over-leaping and falling past it. She was about to scream as she saw the ground rushing up to meet her when she felt a jerk on her neck.

Shocked, she stayed stiff for a moment as she hung in the air, the wind swaying her like a leaf on the tree. She tore her wide-eyed gaze from the ground upward and saw Boulderpaw. The gray apprentice was leaning dangerously over the edge of the branch, his hindpaws digging deep into the wood and a scowl on his face.

With a grunt, Boulderpaw pulled back and her trembling paws touched the branch again. She laid down on her belly and wrapped her paws around the branch as she continued to shake uncontrollably. Boulderpaw sat, panting in front of her. His head was turned away from her, so she couldn't see his expression.

Not that she had time to concern herself with that as she recovered from the shock of fear. "Maybe we should just risk it on land, I don't think I can do this anymore," Scorch mewed in an unsteady voice, her breath still coming in uncontrollable pants.

"That's a good idea," sighed Boulderpaw. He turned his head to look down at her where she was sprawled out, clinging desperately to the branch. He laughed.

It was a new sound to Scorch and it made her want to laugh too, but she knew he was laughing at her, so she couldn't quite muster up the emotion for it in her state. "You think this is so funny?! Wouldn't you do this if you almost just died?" inquired Scorch.

"Probably," Boulderpaw grinned, as if he'd shed the blank exterior for a moment. "Wow," Boulderpaw sighed, standing and stretching on the branch, causing it to shake and Scorch clung to it tighter. "I haven't laughed in so long I thought I'd forgot how to," he mused.

Scorch didn't know how anyone could forget to laugh. But she guessed living under a tyrannical leadership and not doing anything about it was something she didn't understand either. "I can see the sun is starting to set," Scorch mewed, looking at how the shadows were lengthening. "We'd better hurry."

They slowly climbed down the pine tree, Scorch noticed how Boulderpaw watched her carefully and she jumped down from one branch to another. Her fear floated away by the time she was only five tail-lengths above the ground at the lowest branch.

"This is better," Scorch purred, scooting down the trunk and landing with relief on the firm ground. "No bouncing."

Boulderpaw gave her a smirk, "In ThunderClan, cats are trained to tree-fight," he was almost boasting.

Scorch's fur prickled. "I think I'd be better suited to be a ShadowClan cat," she announced, striding forward with her head and tail in the air.

"Oh yeah?" Boulderpaw scowled, catching up to her with his longer strides. "And why is that?"

"Because my dad was a ShadowClan cat," Scorch declared. It just made more sense that way.

"Tell me another one," he snorted.

"No, really! He left when the Clans were taken over," Scorch mewed.

"What was his name?" Boulderpaw asked, well, more like demanded.

"Needlepine."

"Never heard of him," he announced disbelievingly.

"Well, duh, you're ThunderClan. Not to mention he left before you were even born," she pointed out.

"Hmm..."

They fell into silence as they skirted trails and headed for the rushing sound of water. "There it is!" Scorch gasped, eyes widened as she spotted it through the trees. She raced forward, halting at the edge of the trees where the ground turned to pebbles and sand and

sloped down to the water.

"Wow..." Scorch held her breath as she gazed out at the water, awe-struck. She had only seen glimpses of the lake before, she'd never had a clear, unobstructed view of it until now. The water looked endless like the sea, but it seemed gentle, reflecting the clear sky with little ripples of waves rolling with tiny bubbles unto the shore.

The setting sun behind them shone brilliant gold and rosy pink on the water, the shimmering white line down the middle of the lake showed where the sun glanced off it dazzlingly. "Its incredible," she remembered to breathe and sat down, feeling like she could just sit here forever.

"Its pretty open here, if there's a cat on the shore you could be spotted," observed Boulderpaw from where he still stood in the shadowy trees.

"Hmm..." Scorch was in no mood to discuss trivialities like that. "I've never seen water so calm..."

"You haven't seen the lake before?" Boulderpaw sounded surprised, but Scorch's eyes were locked on the shimmering surface.

"No..."

"I guess it is pretty neat, huh?" Boulderpaw sounded like he didn't know what to say, and Scorch's mind felt like it was encased in a fluffy cloud, warm and safe but not functioning smoothly. The colors in her mind turned pink and soft white, blissful innocence filled her. It was a feeling she'd missed since she'd left her parents and right now she felt full and content.

There was silence as Scorch sat and watched in awe at the changing colors of the waves as the sun set. It started gold and white, then turned pinkish-orange, and finally dark red with deep orange sinking to the depths. "Amazing," she breathed as the show ended and the water turned dark, reflecting broken fragments of sky on the moving surface.

But she still didn't feel like moving, her legs were comfortable and

her fur warm while the chill night breeze nipped all around her. She felt like her was slowly rising to the surface of the smooth water, not hurriedly, but gradually bouncing up to break the surface.

"Have you ever wondered, if there was more to life than what was just in front of you?"

Scorch flicked her ear back, she'd almost forgotten Boulderpaw was still there. She thought his question over, trying to decipher what was behind the question and what answer he needed. "I always thought..." she hesitated as she started, "That even though its a big world, with many lives and many creatures living in it, that its what's around you that is naturally most important to you."

It was a true enough statement, but it sounded simple even to Scorch. Was it true that what happened far away didn't affect her? Or vice-versa, that what she did didn't affect far away? Was everything contained to a small little area, and was it possible to break free of the container?

No, such an idea can't even be applied to reality. "That's not right..." Scorch laughed softly her eyes tracing the stars that bounced over the waves. "Everything is connected, every beating heart and working mind, they live off each other for as long as the world will last," Scorch smiled fondly at the water and ran her black paw over a smooth stone.

"Hmm..." Boulderpaw fell quiet again as he thought over her words. "But what is life? Is it just existing? Does it require more than a beating heart? Is this life we live anything other then a tangle of emotions and events? Is it just some kind of game for others to enjoy?"

Is it just a game? The words hammered against Scorch's mind like a a rock slamming down on her head. She blinked, giving a little shake of her head as her thoughts raced. She'd breached the surface and her mind was fresh and gasping.

"Life isn't just a game, its so, so much more..." Scorch took a deep breath, she lacked the air to say the words on her tongue. But it

gave her a chance to pick through her thoughts carefully to what was really in her mind. "Life is a promise, a continuation of a promise from one generation to the next. We are the fulfillment of the promise of our ancestors, and our descendants will be the fruit of our promise."

"Our promise of what?" Boulderpaw's voice was nothing but a breath in her ear, begging, pleading for more words.

Scorch gave a ghost of a smile, the tiniest traces pulling at her face. "The promise we make each and every day, that we will continue to live life for all those who were and those who are yet to be. We survive for them, and they survive for us."

Her words hung in the air, her eyes shyly glancing at Boulderpaw who now sat next to her, their still figures cloaked in purple shadows. Scorch gave a contented sigh, Boulderpaw was thinking hard, she could sense it. Rethinking some major things for him, though she wished she knew just what exactly.

"Do you really believe that's how life works?" Boulderpaw asked, his blue eyes watched the stars. The blue in his eyes no longer seemed faded and dull, it looked sparkling with questions and hope, though just for a moment.

Scorch smiled and softly nudged him, glad she finally got through to him, if only just for right now. "I do, I really do think life is like that." She sighed, this talk of life wasn't really for her. She preferred her thoughts to stay just with her. But she was willing to share them a little for Boulderpaw.

A continuation of promises... of lives... fleeting memories... Something clicked, a sharp spark shooting through her mind like a falling star. *No... maybe? I need to know.*

"So, you asked me about life, now, I want to ask you about something else," Scorch mewed, turning toward Boulderpaw.

"What?" he asked, his eyes were still shining with thought.

"Do you think its possible, just maybe, that the earth remembers

everything that ever happened above it?" She hoped he wouldn't think it was a silly question.

Boulderpaw narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, a more practical look returning to his eyes. "I don't know why not, though I don't know how anyone could know. If its the earth's memories, leave them be," Boulderpaw shrugged and Scorch frowned.

"I guess so." She sighed, wondering what to do now. *Well, I need to get Boulderpaw to his territory, I can figure this out later.* "Lets get moving," she mewed, standing up and stretching. The night air flowed cold and a thin whistle sounded through the trees.

"Okay, lead the way," Boulderpaw looked doubtful though, peering into the blackness beneath the pine trees.

Scorch smirked slightly, although it looked pretty dark, her eyes had adjusted and she could see fairly well. *I guess there is something to the tale of each Clan having special abilities.* She led the way into the pine forest, following her own trail.

She was sure they were nearing the ThunderClan-ShadowClan-Rogue border when she stopped suddenly, Boulderpaw bumping into from behind, muttering something incoherently. "Shh, get in that bush," she hissed and hurriedly nudged the surprised cat into the holly bush.

"What is it?" growled Boulderpaw, his breath hot on her ear as he leaned over her.

"Shh, its two cats, they're ShadowClan... but not ShadowClan," Scorch paused, her nose wrinkling. Somehow, the smell slightly reminded her of her mother, the watery-fishy tinge her mother had was stronger from these cats then it had been on Rainstone.

"Its RiverClan," reported Boulderpaw, "I wondered what had happened to them."

Scorch peered through the darkness, the moon was only a sliver in the sky, and not much of its light broke through the thick pines anyways. But she made out the two moving shadows. She identified

one a tom and one a she-cat by scent.

"What's the point of dragging me out so far in the middle of the night?" the she-cat was complaining, Scorch recognized the voice as the whiny cat from a patrol a moon ago. She didn't sound nearly as ear-piercing now.

"Quiet, Willowwater, I prefer going out at night to gather herbs. But I'd be in trouble if I went alone, come on, I don't ask this of you very often," the tom mewed calmly.

"You'll be in trouble even if I'm with you, Flickertail; Nightwing will have a fit if he finds out," Willowwater pointed out sharply.

Flickertail let out a small laugh, "At least the punishment will be cut in half this way!"

"That's not funny, jerk!" Willowwater snapped, though there was a light-hearted tone in her voice that told she wasn't really mad.

"Flickertail used to be RiverClan's medicine-cat," Boulderpaw whispered in her ear. *Medicine-cat?* Scorch felt excited at the thought, but she hesitated.

"They don't seem to be in complete compliance with their leader, should we go talk to them?" Scorch whispered.

"No way!" boulderpaw hissed a little too loudly.

"Who's there?!" Willowwater demanded from the shadows. *Darn, and they had almost passed us too.* "Come out now or I'll shred your fur off," the she-cat was snarling.

"Great, now look what you did?" Scorch hissed.

"What? You're blaming everything on me now?!" Boulderpaw snarled, nose-to-nose with her. Their empty bellies and exhausted minds fueling the feud.

"If you hadn't been snooping around the border, we wouldn't have been in this mess in the first place!" Scorch hissed, her fatigue getting the best of her irritation. Now it looked liked they were in

for a fight or at least a long sprint. She didn't know if she had the energy.

"Well, it looks like that cat is going to have a fit if we don't show ourselves, maybe we can get away unscathed," Boulderpaw sighed.

"You're too optimistic," Scorch snapped.

"Ha! That's rich coming from miss happiness!"

"Whoever said I was miss happiness?!"

"You're always cheery, going around with that stupid grin on your face while everyone is suffering!" Boulderpaw was really getting on her nerves now.

"We only met once before today! How can you say anything about me?!"

"COME OUT NOW!" They both jumped at the she-cat's bellow and they slunk out of the bush, shooting guilty glances at each other. *Can we screw up anymore tonight?*

Scorch kept her face toward the ground, but her eyes looked up at the she-cat in front of her, the looming she-cat was imposing a threatening demeanor. The she-cat's green eyes glared down on them and Scorch wanted nothing more to shrivel up under the blistering stare.

"Who. Are. You?"

Scorch looked at Boulderpaw, wondering if he'd answer, but he was staring at his paws, blue eyes smoldering with emotions that Scorch couldn't distinguish. *Guess its up to me.*

"I'm Scorch," she mewed clearly, forcing herself to meet the older she-cat's gaze without flinching. She widened her eyes and stared steadily, hoping to show herself as calm and collected.

"Hmm." The she-cat, Willowwater, had narrowed her eyes as her as she began to speak. "You not from here?" Willowwater more or less stated than asked.

"No, I'm from far away from here," Scorch answered, guessing her accent and name had given her away.

"From the mountains?" Scorch was surprised by the assumption and huffed.

"No, I don't know any mountains. I'm from the beach," she corrected the older she-cat with a hint of annoyance.

The she-cat was quiet for a moment, the tom peering over her shoulder with wide amber eyes that betrayed shock and wonder. "And him?" the she-cat nodded at Booulderpaw who started growling in his throat.

"He is Boulderpaw, from ThunderClan," Scorch held a warning in her voice meant for Boulderpaw. They couldn't fight off two grown cats any easier now than before.

"The two cats that escaped into our territory this morning, I presume?" Willowwater spoke, but she didn't sound any angrier than before.

"Yes, and we'd like to finish our escapade," mewed Scorch, nudging the point that they'd like to get moving.

"I won't stop you, on one condition," Willowwater growled.

"Yes?" inquired Boulderpaw in a snarl.

"Keep you claws in, kit, just don't tell any cat that we saw each other. This never happened, got it?" Willowwater growled.

"Easy enough, we agree," Scorch mewed, stuffing her tail in Boulderpaw's mouth before he said anything else she'd regret.

Willowwater and the tom started moving on when Scorch's eyes picked up something, it was a mirage. But it was different then before. She wasn't still where she had been, she was in another place entirely. A sunny, green clearing with willow trees and clear splashing water.

A quiet laugh echoed in her mind and she turned, seeing two cats

sitting by the water's edge chatting. *Mom?!* She recognized Rainstone's dark gray fur and dark blue eyes. She was sitting with Willowwater. *What is this?*

They were chatting, their words meaningless babble in her ears, blending in with the chatter of the streams. But it was her, her mother, just to look at her mother was so good. But then she noticed something. Her mother, her right ear wasn't ripped. *Is this... a memory from when my mother was younger?*

Then it was gone and she was in the dark forest. She was totally blind for a moment as her eyes refocused from the light to dark, as if it had been real. She shrugged off Boulderpaw who was shaking her insistently and raced after Willowwater.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" she cried, not knowing what to do other then confirm her suspicions.

"What?!" Willowwater snapped, turning on her. Boulderpaw had followed her and halted a few paces behind her as she skidded to a stop.

"I have to ask," she panted.

"Please, go on," was the sarcastic snarl she got.

"Do you know a cat named Rainstone?" she asked, desperately searching the gray tabby's green eyes. She almost felt her heart stop as Willowwater gave a spasm.

"Yes, I know of her," the gray she-cat mewed, quickly recovering from the moment. "But how do you?" the she-cat narrowed her eyes.

Scorch lifted her chin and stared the she-cat straight in the eye. "I'm her daughter."

The declaration had little affect on Boulderpaw, who obviously didn't know of her mother, but had a much greater affect on the two RiverClan cats in front of her. "Your mother, huh?" Willowwater surprisingly gave a small smile and her eyes took on a dreamy wondering look for a moment.

"Yes," Scorch mewed impatiently.

"Well, good for you," Willowwater turned her back quickly and started walking off.

Flickertail, however, stopped and stared at her for a moment, as if he were seeing something else entirely. "Come on, Flickertail! Even if she is Rainstone's daughter, that has nothing to do with us anymore," Willowwater looked over her shoulder, her green eyes gave her a... desolate look. As if she'd been abandoned.

Flickertail waved his tail but then suddenly leaned in close to Scorch. She leaned her head back a little, not liking the intense look in his amber eyed. "Leave her alone!" Boulderpaw growled, coming up to her side and glaring at Flickertail.

The tom leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Go to the Moonpool." Then he backed up, blinked once, and dashed after his Clan-mate. *What the?*

She and Boulderpaw stood without making a sound as the two characters of the chance encounter faded from hearing. Leaving them with only silence and shadows.

Chapter 17: Taste of Stars

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"Well, there's the border," Scorch mewed in a hushed voice as the ThunderClan border finally came into view.

"About time," Boulderpaw grumbled, he kept looking over his shoulder. He had clearly been irked at being caught by the two RiverClan cats.

Scorch glanced sideways up at him. His blue eyes didn't look melancholy anymore, or at least not as much as they had been. He seemed refreshed, relaxed even though they were in enemy territory. As if he had managed to forget what had been depressing him, for awhile at least.

"Well, its been quiet an adventure," Scorch gave a faint laugh as they crossed the border, a slight sheen of silver starlight gleamed off of Boulderpaw's stone-gray coat, catching her eye. Suddenly she realized she didn't want to leave him just yet. Wasn't ready for a goodbye for a friendship that had barely begun.

She jumped in front of him and faced him. He looked surprised for a moment, then sighed. "What is it now?" he grumbled, his chest heaving an exaggerated sigh.

"What's the Moonpool?" she just had to ask. The name had been sparking in her mind since Flickertail had whispered the word to her. She didn't know if Boulderpaw would know, but it was a perfect excuse to talk to him more.

Boulderpaw seemed startled, backing up a pace and blinking at her several times. "Where did you hear that name?" his tone was guarded and wary. Strange since he had never seemed surprised before at anything she'd said.

"Flickertail whispered that I should go to it, and I don't know why,

but it gives me the chills every time I hear it," Scorch shuddered as she remembered the icy trills down her spine.

Boulderpaw paused, looking back at the ShadowClan border that was still in site. "Lets put more distance between us and ShadowClan, then I'll tell you," he muttered, as if he was purposefully trying to peak her curiosity.

He brushed past her and started off quickly. Scorch had to lengthen into a lope to keep up with his swift jog. The fallen leaves crackled underpaw and the dry browning grass failed to catch any beauty from the faint light of the night sky. A brisk breeze flowed over them, not as nipping cold as some other breezes, but enough to make her shiver and fluff up her fur some more.

Boulderpaw finally slowed down and hopped up onto a large, knobby root that arched above the ground. Scorch sighed in exhaustion and hoped her paws could manage the small jump. She heaved in a breath and jumped up, rocking back and forth as she tried to find her balance.

"Okay, so tell me about this Moonpool before I fall asleep," Scorch yawned, almost falling backward but Boulderpaw wrapped his tail around her shoulders and held her up. He kept his tail there and Scorch didn't shrug him off, since his tail was warm and protected her nose from the cold.

She peered up at him a little shyly, but he wasn't looking at her, he was frowning at the ground. "I've never been to the Moonpool, but Skypool has told me about it."

"So its a place?" she asked, she'd thought it was since Flickertail told her to *go to it,* but she'd supposed it could have been a cat or some kind of herb.

"Yes, its a very special place," Boulderpaw nodded, raising his head and looking up through the branches to the star speckled sky. "It is the place where Medicine-cats and leaders can speak to StarClan."

StarClan, another word that sent chills through her. She shivered, and snuggled closer to Boulderpaw for warmth. She huffed as he

shifted away and drew his tail away. She crouched, hoping to hold in her warmth better and shivered. "Hurry before I freeze," she hissed through chattering teeth.

"Its not that cold, and with all that fur I'm surprised you can even feel the breeze," scoffed Boulderpaw.

"You may not have noticed, but I'm only five moons old, meaning my fur isn't as thick as yours yet," Scorch pointed out.

Boulderpaw shrugged, "Whatever. Well, that's why the Moonpool is special."

"But what's StarClan?" Scorch asked, looking up.

Boulderpaw didn't seem surprised and swept his tail behind him, brushing leaves gently. "StarClan are our ancestors who have left this world. They live up there, in Silverpelt," he looked up at the night sky and waved his paw to indicate the whole night sky.

Scorch stared up, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "Cats become stars when they die?" she whispered.

Boulderpaw nodded, "So then they can watch over us forever."

"What about falling stars? Do cats leave StarClan?" Scorch asked, spotting a falling star just then.

"Falling stars are cats in StarClan that move on to another place where they can put their worries for their descendants aside and just rest in peace. Or, that's what the elders would say," Boulderpaw looked at his paws, seeming very sad for a moment.

An image of four cats with stars in their fur standing beside Song sparked in her mind. Were those cats from StarClan? If so, maybe they could tell her about her power! And explain what her mother did in the Clans. "How do I find the Moonpool?" she asked, sitting up and looking at Bouldrpaw seriously.

Boulderpaw scowled, "I wouldn't tell a rogue where the most sacred place in the Clans is," he glared at her and she glared back.

"But Flickertail told me to go there!" she tried to sound convincing and not hurried.

"That cat has probably lost the better part of his mind from living under Nightwing's rule, I wouldn't take anything he said seriously," declared Boulderpaw.

"Just tell me!" Scorch hissed, leaning in to Boulderpaw and staring him fiercely in the eye.

"Sorry, but its still a no," Boulderpaw growled back. "I'm going to say goodnight before I do something I might regret," he sniffed, turning away sharply and jumping down from the root. "The rogue border is that way," he pointed in the direction with his tail. "Just because you helped me, doesn't mean I'm going to do the same for you, or hesitate to use force to drive you away."

Scorch watched him disappear into the shadows, he didn't ever look back. *Toms! They just hate saying 'thank you,' for whatever reason. But just because he isn't going to help me, doesn't mean I'm giving up. No way, that's never happening.*

...

Because it was so late and already dark, Scorch decided she'd look for the Moonpool tomorrow and she headed in the direction Boulderpaw had point, glad that the rogue border was close by and also at a place she was familiar with, making it easy to find her way to the den.

She felt dead on her paws as she dragged herself into the thin, rustling den. Mira was asleep and, as usual, Jump was curled up close to her so that their fur touched. Scorch cringed when she saw Painted's bright green eyes pop open and jump gracefully to her paws in the din.

"Where have you been? You were gone all day yesterday!" Painted hissed.

Scorch stared at her blankly, her mind was already shutting down as she saw her little nest. "Talk later, need sleep," she mumbled, her

mouth hardly opening. She hadn't eaten anything yesterday either, so her strength just wasn't there to do anything other then drag herself to her nest and pass out into the comfort of sleep.

...

She woke late the next morning; it was almost sun-high. Jump and Painted were no longer in the den, but Mira was carefully grooming her fur where she could reach without moving her leg too much. Scorch yawned and stumbled to her paws, going over and checking Mira's healing leg more on habit than concern.

The break was mending, slowly, but mending. She quickly replaced the poultice with the supply of herbs she'd stocked, since she hadn't done it last night. "You feeling better?" Scorch asked, gently running her paw over the break.

"Every day!" Mira purred back, looking her usually cherry self. Her blue eyes were bright and held the gentle, bubbly look Scorch had come to long when she felt stressed.

"That's good," Scorch sighed and leaned back. "In another moon you should be able to start walking around again, but don't forget to do your exercise everyday," Scorch reminded her, referring to the stretches and challenging movements she'd designed to help Mira's leg heal strong and smooth.

"Don't worry about that, Jump makes sure I do them every day. As if I can't do them by myself," Mira rolled her eyes but she was laughing softly, the affection she felt for her mate as obvious as ever.

Scorch laughed with her, but broke off as her belly grumbled. "By the way, why weren't you around yesterday?" Mira asked, her gaze wasn't judging, just curious, and Scorch knew she really wouldn't care what she did as long as she came back safe.

"Oh, one thing led to another and it just took awhile to get back," Scorch mewed, using a claw to etch lines in the dirt.

"Well, Painted was very angry. I'm sure she's going to have a talk

with you, so good luck," Mira purred, nudging her gently with her nose.

"Food first," Scorch sighed, turning toward the entrance of the patchy den and exiting. The sun was bright and warm for so late in the year, the breeze was murmuring through the treetops and it mixed with birdsong. *A perfect day.*

Then she saw Painted waiting on the other side of the yellow-grassed clearing, her cream head bowed and a stormy scowl on her face. *Or it would have been.* She didn't even need her sharp senses to pick up on the fact that Painted was in a foul mood for one reason or another.

"Nice to see you're finally awake," Painted growled, her tail flicking impatiently.

Scorch looked around, wondering if she could escape this somehow. Not seeing anything, she sighed and dragged herself up to stand in front of Painted. "Did you want something?" Scorch asked politely, wondering what Painted wanted her to do.

"Yes, you wandering off for a day without telling any cat is totally unacceptable!" Painted was standing and looming over her now. Scorch was a little surprised by this intense anger and she had a bad feeling about what was coming next.

"I'm sorry, I won't do it agai-" She started but Painted cut her off.

"Don't give me that! Tell me what you were doing!" Painted snapped, "Spit it out! And don't even think about lying, I know exactly what you've been doing, hanging around with those Clan-cats. You need to decide, are you trying to find your parents, or trying to join the Clans? Because I assure you, you won't be able to do both!" Painted snarled, her bright green eyes blazing.

Scorch looked to the side and saw Jump nodding solemnly, his green eyes held an unfriendly look and somehow Scorch felt like she was no longer considered family with these cats. "I-I'm not joining the Clans," she mewed, switching her gaze back to Painted. But it sounded unconvincing even to her.

"Oh really? Then tell that cat that's been training you that you never want to see her again," Painted growled, a dare in her eyes.

Scorch felt a lump in her throat. *If they knew the whole time, why didn't they stop me before I knew about the conflict the Clans are in?! Now that I know, I can't just say goodbye and be done with it!*

She remembered the distressed and trapped look in Leafpaw's eyes; the empty, melancholy look in Boulderpaw's, Moonpaw's anger, Willowwater's abandonment, and Flickertail's hope. She looked at her paws, they were trembling. *If there's something I can do, I have to do it. I don't hate the Clans! I don't hate them like Painted and Jump, but... to help the Clans, will I have to leave my only real friends?*

She didn't know, there was so much she didn't know, and she couldn't decide now. "I'm not going to stop visiting the Clans cats, as long as we are here," Scorch mewed looking up defiantly into Painted's angry eyes. She stood calmly, but she was shrinking on the inside in fear that she was about to lose her oldest friendship, but she couldn't leave things as they were with the Clans. She knew in her heart that she'd regret it the rest of her life if she didn't do all she could.

Painted narrowed her eyes, a growl rumbling in her throat and her fangs showing two sharp rows of gleaming white. "Then get out."

The words dropped from Painted's mouth like thunderclaps on Scorch's ears. Scorch stared, blinking, looking between Jump and Painted, their stern faces showed no appeal for mercy. Her heart beat fast, proving it understood, but her mind was having trouble understanding what Painted meant.

"Where?" she asked, looking around.

"Out of here, I don't want to see a cat that we risk our lives to help, and then repays us by befriending the murderers of my family!" Painted snarled.

"They didn't kill your family, foxes did," Scorch stated dumbly.

"But it was because of them," Painted snarled.

Scorch blinked, feeling as if she was filling with ice. "Fine, I'm leaving, but I'll be back," Scorch mewed, passing Painted calmly, her ice failing to melt next to the flame of Painted's anger. She knew Painted didn't truly believe that if she left she'd be gone forever, but she did sense Painted's frustration and despair and knew she couldn't be reasoned with right now.

"Don't come back!" Painted yowled.

"Until when?" Scorch looked over her shoulder.

Painted hesitated, panting and looking around as if she didn't believe she was really leaving.

Scorch turned her head to forward and chuckled to the ground. She knew a way to get back that would spark thought and confusion to calm Painted down. "How about when I taste the stars? Then I'll come back," She suggested, tilting her head toward Painted's confused face.

"Fine," that was the last word Painted spoke and then Scorch left, hurrying through the pine forest. Once away from the face of Painted's rage and Jump's disdain, the ice flowed away and she began panicking. *What am I going to do?! What am I going to do?! Okay, I just need to go to the Moonpool, and taste it, then come back, right? Of course, I have no idea where the Moonpool is..!*

She spun around, the wind had picked up and darkening clouds were rolling in. The sky matched her restless emotions and she was thankful for it. It made more and more Mirages appear. *Okay, just concentrate, if these are what I think they are, there should be one going to the Moonpool.*

Scorch leaped toward the Clan border, crossing the ThunderClan border and pausing after making sure she was alone. She closed her eyes and focused for a moment, then opened them and her eyes were drawn by themselves to one particular mirage.

It was a pale brown cat, with pooling blue eyes and Scorch blinked and shivered when she caught the heavy scent of herbs. *These things just get more real.* But it was what she needed, so she began

following the mirage, focusing on the sounds and sensations around her so that she wouldn't break the mirage.

She made her way deeper and deeper into ThunderClan territory. She was aware of cats near her, but she was too immersed on her mirage's waving tail she was following to even try to avoid them. But providence smiled on her and none of them spotted the wandering, little rogue kit with spiky fur and wide eyes.

Eventually she was aware of the splashing of water up ahead. The mirage paused by a creek, and seemed to talk to mirages Scorch could not see, then proceeded at a forgiving pace up the slope which the stream ran down. The undergrowth dropped away, and the trees eventually fell behind her as she struggled up the now rocky hillside.

The sun was edging ever closer to the horizon and the clouds that had rolled overhead were fading away when she leaped with a thump up the last boulder. Then silence, her mirage disappeared in an instant, she sensed that it had vanished not because of her, but for a different reason.

She looked around at her rocky surroundings. She was in a gray stone hollow, the stream running out between two boulders to her right side. But the stream pooled in the hollow before it trickled out, a large, translucent pool that looked a beautiful deep hue of blue she could not recall seeing anywhere else.

The water cascaded down a series of step-up rocks into the pool, but the pool never rippled. It was perfectly still. *The Moonpool,* she knew that this was it. She could sense strange presences as well, they weren't her mirages, she couldn't see them, but she could feel them with her soul.

She knew she should go to the pool, but she held back. It wasn't time yet, though she wasn't sure when it would be time. But she left the hollow, looking around to hunt, since she hadn't had a meal in over a day and she was feeling light-headed.

She fairly easily caught a mouse, and gulped down the morsel, feeling strength flow back into her young body. She could have

eaten another one more, or two, she was still so hungry, but the sun had gone down and she felt her paws tugging her back to the pool. *Of course, the Moonpool must only be visited when the moon is out.*

She reentered the stone hollow and slipped down the path, her paws touching faint dimples in the sandstone, promising generations of cats having tread this path before. She wondered if she belonged here, she wasn't a Clan cat, and even though her father used to be, he had left his Clan. She wondered if she could even be considered half-Clan.

But her worries disappeared as she gazed down into the Moonpool. There was no moon. It was the night of the new-moon, the sky was without the white radiance. But that did not perturb Scorch, for now the stars glittered more brilliantly then ever. Usually this was the Moonpool, but tonight it was that Starpool. *Taste of stars.* That was what would be her token to getting back in with Painted and her friends.

Though, honestly, Painted is probably calmed down enough that she'd let me back anyways. She had just been holding in her resentment on what I had been doing for a whole moon, so she finally just burst. But she'll be over it, she'll have to. I'm sure Mira is already on her case.

She could picture Mira yelling at Painted and Jump for kicking her out. Even though Painted acted like the leader of the group most of the time, every cat was aware that Mira's word was final. And she highly doubted Mira would be happy with her being driven away.

She laughed softly as she gazed down at the pool. She crouched down on her ice-cold stone and she lapped at the pool, so she could taste the stars. It was water like no other, clearer then crystal and it burned her throat like liquid-fire, setting her paws tingling and her heart fluttering.

Her eyes closed on their own, and when she had recovered from the shock of the electrifying water, she jumped in amazement to find herself not in the same place as before. *Where the heck am I?* She was in a clearing surrounded by forest. But it was so strange! The air was pleasantly warm and the breeze carried the sweet scent of lilacs and honeysuckle and little pink petals off a cherry tree blew

in the wind as if were late new-leaf rather then late leaf-fall.

It was all beautiful. The green was richer then she'd ever seen, the leaves on the trees looked soft and large. She saw no bushes or undergrowth that would tear at her fur, just soft beautiful ferns whose leaves created intricate shadows on the ground like the seashells that dotted the shores that she was from.

Shadows? She looked up at the sky, eyes widening in amazement. She felt so close to the sky that she could just fall into the depths of black sky or if she reached out a paw she could catch a star on her paws and hold it like a firefly within her paws.

But what was most startling was the moon, it was a full moon and looked larger then the sun in the daytime. *How is this even possible?* But she wasn't scared, in fact, for the first time in possibly forever, she felt completely at home. As if there was no where else for her to be but here.

"You are in StarClan," a familiar voice spoke behind her, the rasp in the voice and the accent flowed around her, but she was too mesmerized by this unreal view of the sky to look at the speaker.

"Song, aren't those the Clan's ancestors?" she managed to ask, her eyes still studying the gray indents on the moon.

"Yes, and in turn, some of your ancestors," Song responded, her voice sounding closer.

"Then why are you here?" Scorch asked, finally turning to look at the tall black she-cat.

"Because I am watching over you, and so I am currently residing in this place of stars," Song explained, sweeping her tail around her.

Scorch blinked a few times, then she realized something she hadn't before. Something that startled her. "You're *dead?!*"

"Yes, and I have been for a long time," Song mewed.

"T-then, my Mirages, are they dead cats?" Scorch felt repulsed by the thought that she'd been watching dead cats her whole life.

Song sighed and dropped her head, "Yes, most of them are dead at present, but don't worry. You are not actually seeing the spirits of dead cats, you have been seeing something else," Song explained.

Scorch shuffled her paws, "Am I seeing memories? Is that what you've been telling me?" mumbled Scorch reluctantly, voicing her latest suspicion.

"That is correct. You are seeing the memories of the earth, every cat that once walked the earth leaves an imprint on it that seldom any cat can detect. You, however, can detect them, and even see them as clearly as if you were there when they were actually alive," Song explained.

Scorch looked at her paws. She wished some cat would tell her what she was supposed to think. Was it good that she had this ability? Could she use it to help others, or even herself? Or was it a curse, a curse that would eventually consume her?

"But *why* can I detect them?" she asked miserable. "Why am I so different?" she looked up pleadingly into Song's amber eyes.

Song blinked slowly and swished her tail. "I cannot tell you why, or how this is. It was never prophesied, nothing abnormal was ever seen. But sometimes, the things that effect the world the most, are those great things we cannot see," murmured Song softly.

"But-" her questioning mew disappeared as Song faded and she was left in the clearing. The calm, warm air a stark contrast to her turbulent feelings of icy fear and harsh confusion.

"You really aren't too bright, huh?" Scorch whirled around at the grumble. The speaker was evidently a sturdy looking pale red she-cat with creamy dark brown paws and ears and darker brown eyes. The cat's fur shimmered with stardust and a white fire burned around her, gleaming off the long silky fur.

The scent of this cat could only be explained as the smell of life. Ironic since every cat here was supposedly dead. It was the mystic scent of night, the warm scent of the sun, fresh like a newborn but at the same time as ageless as the sky they walked in.

"Who are you?" Scorch asked, no longer surprised. She doubted she could ever be surprised by anything ever again. *I know I like things to be extraordinary, but this really is too much.*

"My name is Rosewing, not that it matters, since you don't know me," the self-named Rosewing had an air of irritation that was even harsher than Jump's.

"Is there a reason you came to talk to me?" Scorch mewed impatiently, Rosewing's unfriendliness had toned her a bit more sober.

"Maybe, how do you even know I came to talk to you? You're in my home, I could have just wandered upon you," the older she-cat had stopped and sat down, observing her with shielded eyes.

"Unlikely, since the first thing you did was insult me before I'd even spotted you. A strange thing to do if you just, 'happened,' upon me, don't you think?" Scorch mewed cheekily.

"I don't need your sass," the older cat snapped. "But you are correct, I did come to talk to you. Though I still have some doubts," Rosewing grumbled.

"Please, continue," Scorch waved her tail in such serious politeness that it was almost mockery. Not that it was her goal in the very least to mock this cat she didn't know.

"There's been talk about a particular, 'Fire of Spirit,' however it is very unclear in the meaning or importance," Rosewing began.

"But what does this have to do with me? And what is that anyways?" Scorch asked.

"I don't know," Rosewing's tone had sharp sarcasm. Then she sighed and looked at her paws, "Some cats think you are this, 'Fiery spirit,'" the cat admitted finally.

Scorch then decided that their was no limit to how confused and surprised a cat could feel in one night.

"I still don't understand what it means, does it mean Spirit as in

internal energy and drive? Or Spirit as in... ghost?" Scorch frowned, thinking the latter was a far scarier, and in light of recent revelations, quiet likely.

"I did not come here to decipher it for you," Robinwing growled. "I only came to deliver the message to you, you have to work out its meaning and fulfill it on you own, if you can."

Well, its commonly known that its against nature to let a challenge go unchallenged. And Scorch especially loved a challenge to her skills. She also was one of those cats that promised more then they could offer. "Don't worry, I've got it covered," Scorch grinned confidently.

Robinwing growled at her unfounded confidence. "There was one more thing I was supposed to tell you. Something you've already been told, but have seemingly forgotten."

"And that would be..?" Scorch inquired, frowning as she tried to remember what she may have forgotten.

"You are not destined to save the Clans. That fate has been given to different cats, you are not to interfere with the doings of the Clans," Robinwing growled warningly.

Scorch paused, perplexed. She remembered now, that one night when she'd seen Song with four other cats with stars in their fur. One of them, a tom, had told her that she was not supposed to save the Clans.

"But, then how am I supposed to help the Clans?" Scorch asked, feeling even more lost then before.

"What did I say? Of course you already forgot it. Kits never listen, they hear one thing and assume another. I can't help you further, I can only wish you good luck and perhaps... thank you for your troubles," Robinwing gave one nod of thanks and then Scorch's vision became hazy, and when she blinked she was once again beside the Moonpool.

Was it a dream? Or something else? But Robinwing's few words of

thanks had renewed her resolve to help the Clans. *I don't care what they say, I will do what I choose to do.* Though she was now more unsure of her position and what she could do.

But as she bent her head and lapped up some more water, the taste of stars filled her and she knew that whatever she chose, wherever she went, the stars would be with her just like her Mirages.

Chapter 18: Lucky

Chapter 18: Lucky

The sun was rising. The clear night had given way to a cloudy dawn and the air was moist with the scent of rain. The chill breeze that drove the clouds in had an edge even sharper then previously known to the kit. Scorch watched from the arched grove at the top of the path that led down to the Moonpool.

Faint gray light silvered the path down to the lake. But Scorch stayed still. Her thoughts swirled, her eyes stayed staring. *What's my next move?* She could see several paths for her to take, but all faded into shadows and mist before long.

One was for her to go back to the den, and by that she meant Painted's and the others den. One was her to go and seek out Flickertail or Skypool and collect more information about the Moonpool. A third option was to go find Boulderpaw and test the new information she'd accumulated. A final, tantalizing option was for her to just leave.

She could feel it, just above her reach. The fresh air of freedom. It was a fanciful idea, one she was aware that she knew she'd never take, but it tingled her senses nonetheless to tease the idea. To go roaming, she could survive on her own now if she was smart. No worries, no difficult cats to answer to, no lives to worry about, no mysteries to solve.

But then, my life would be quiet boring. She smirked to herself, it was the very truth and she had no reason to argue with it. She yawned and stretched. She felt as if she hadn't slept at all last night, but she was strong enough to get steadily to her paws and head down the path. She'd decided that she'd seek out Boulderpaw, it seemed like the most pleasant thing to do. *Not that he was particularly kind last time we met.* She rolled her eyes as she remembered his rather... unfriendly parting words.

Stop. She hesitated, looking around. She was still outside of sight of Clan territory, but she knew she was close. Boulderpaw had said he wouldn't help her; but she wasn't taking his words as anything but tough talk. She'd done the same with Moonpaw,and she knew how well that had ended out. *Will he attack me too?*

She wondered if she could stand to be attacked by another cat she thought of as a friend. *But I'm willing to risk it! I... I trust him more then I trusted Moonpaw.* It felt embarrassing to admit even to herself. Thinking as if there was already a connection between them, an unbreakable bond. That's how she liked to think, but it was so unsupported that she doubted it could be true.

But there's something about Boulderpaw that I can't forget... Just something beneath the surface that I can sense. He's special, and I'd like to know why. She slowed as she neared the ThunderClan border. *So how do I find Boulderpaw?*

She didn't really come up with any clever ideas, so she supposed she'd just have to try to guess where he might be and start searching. *Well, he was acting awfully suspicious sniffing around the ShadowClan border last time, I suppose its a start.*

Scorch didn't really believe in, 'luck,' but she would consider herself lucky if compared to most other cats she'd met. But it didn't mean she thought this would be incredibly simple. Not long after crossing the border, a mouse darted in front of her and she had it caught before she could think.

She felt a little uncomfortable, Leafpaw had drilled it into her head that it was against the fundamental base of the warrior-code to steal prey. *But I'm not a warrior! And I'm awfully hungry... Besides, if I left it, it may just go to waste!*

She gave in, ignoring her pricking conscious and focused on how good this mouse felt in her empty belly. "Hey! Its a rogue!" She jumped, startled at the sudden flurry of angry voices. She turned in time to see three full-grown cats racing toward her with fangs flashing and claws outstretched.

Their intent was clear enough for her. She abandoned the

remaining pile of bones and lit out back toward the WindClan border, hoping to escape her pursuers with the border. As she saw the WindClan border she hissed at her own stupidity. True, Leafpaw had told her stories about how the Clans fought over cats crossing the border, but ThunderClan and WindClan were connected at present!

She dared a glance behind her to see the three cats still in pursuit, slowly closing the gap between them. Scorch gasped as the ground abruptly sloped down to the stream, her small paws tumbling out from under her as she rolled head over tail down the ditch into the stream.

Cold! That was the first thing she thought as she ker-splashed into the rushing water. It wasn't terribly deep, so she was flung back to the surface and able to heave in a gasp, blinking water from her eyes in time to see the three cats spitting curses at her from the shore as the current swept her along swiftly.

She smirked at them, somehow overlooking the fact that she was tumbling in a freezing stream in even colder weather. She spluttered and coughed as water slapped against her muzzle and she was dunked underwater again. When she broke the surface again she could feel the cold numbing her muscles and she gritted her teeth and bit her tongue as she kicked out for the shore.

The stream wasn't terribly wide, three tail-lengths maybe, but it seemed an eternity of effort before her paws brushed the slimy mud of the banks. She dragged herself up till her paws were hardly covered with water. She was drenched, dangerously cold, and completely exhausted.

I-I can't move. She felt her legs buckle, but she stayed conscious enough to wonder what she was going to do. Her cheek burned as it was pressed against the cold ground. Drawing in a shaky breath her vision turned black. *I know I don't believe in luck, but would it have killed the world to let me be just a little lucky?!*

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"You really are an idiot." Scorch grumbled in response, recognizing

the snarky voice in her ear.

She tried to open her eyes and managed to crack on open half-way. "Bouldepaw?" she asked, her teeth chattering. "Where am I?" she shivered and pulled her legs against her belly from where she was evidently stretched out on her side.

"Just outside ThunderClan territory, on the rogue border. It took forever to carry you here, I think you must be eating too much for a kit," Boulderpaw's face was turned away from her, but she caught the mock in his words.

"I don't need you to be a jerk!" Scorch hissed through her shivering teeth.

"Oh yeah, you probably realized this, but it could be deadly to go swimming in this weather," Boulderpaw ignored her and turned to glare at her for her foolishness.

"I didn't do it on purpose!"

"Then be more careful! If I hadn't come along, you could have just frozen to death. Or at least gotten very sick," Boulderpaw huffed, his tail flicking irritably.

"Sorry," Scorch grunted as she wobbled into a sitting position. "Why is it so dark?" she yawned.

"Maybe because its dusk and its been cloudy all day? I'm surprised it hasn't rained y-"

"Don't finish that sentence!" Scorch squeaked, stuffing Boulderpaw's mouth with her tail. She looked carefully up at the purple-gray sky and squinted her eyes, not breathing. She could feel Boulderpaw glaring at her, but he didn't say anything.

Drip-drip-drop. Scorch hissed in frustration and wrenched her tail from Boulderpaw's mouth. "Look what you did! Because you said that, it started to rain!"

"That has nothing to do with it!" Boulderpaw burst out, leaping to his paws.

"Then why did it suddenly start raining?" Scorch questioned pointedly.

"We call that a coincidence!"

"I don't believe coincidences! I think everything happens as a direct result of something! The world heard your skepticism, so it decided to start raining on us," Scorch stated, "You should know that irony is the favorite thing in nature," she added, poking the flustered tom.

"You're crazy! Nature doesn't have a conscience!"

"You sure about that?" Scorch yawned again. *Come on, I've been sleeping all day. But besides that, I think that if I can see the world's memories, then why shouldn't it have some control ability? If nothing else makes sense, why should this?*

She got up and hobbled on stiff, aching legs to the sparse shelter of a beach tree. Boulderpaw came over a moment later when the rain got heavier. Scorch looked up fondly at the old tree. "This is where I made my first catch with Leafpaw," she sighed, running her paw over the smooth bark.

Boulderpaw watched her quietly. "She didn't leave camp this morning. Did something happen?" When they were in ShadowClan territory, Scorch had told him all about how Leafpaw had trained her.

"Well, I wasn't there either, so it doesn't matter. But I guess we might be done, I think I upset Leafpaw a lot," Scorch sighed, frowning. *I know I'm much more skilled then before I trained with her, but still... I'm not a match for most cats.*

"What did you say to her? I know Leafpaw pretty well, it takes quite a bit to get her angry," he commented, shivering closer as the wind blew the freezing rain like a mist over them.

Scorch watched the rain, hazy black in the shadows of the deepening night. But it still gleamed off of leaves and stones that is slicked down. She didn't want to tell Boulderpaw, for fear he'd leave like Leafpaw, but it would be worse to lie.. "We were talking about

the Clans and I said that instead of always complaining about Pinefur and Nightwing, the Clans should do something about it," Scorch mewed, looking away nervously.

But Boulderpaw jumped to his paws and faced her, eyes wide. "That's exactly how I feel! But no other cat seems willing to fight!" Scorch felt a wave of relief and happiness that at least they thought the same on this point.

"Do you think we could convince them otherwise, to stand up and fight?!" Scorch asked excitedly, already formulating plans in her head.

"Maybe! But... Why would you get involved? Its not you business..." Boulderpaw looked uncomfortable, as if he was trying to ask the question without seeming rude.

"I am half-Clan!" she huffed, hoping that it would be a good enough excuse until later. Because right now, she didn't even know why she was doing this.

"Oh yeah... Still not sure if I believe that though," he answered in skepticism. But he didn't seem inclined to pursue the matter further so Scorch let it drop.

"Anyways, there's one thing I want to do," Scorch mewed, bracing herself.

"I have a feeling I won't like it, but ask anyways," Boulderpaw sighed.

"Do you know where the fight was, when Pinefur took over the Clan?" she asked, squinting her eyes into the now unbreakable darkness.

"Yeah... where the main body of the fight was at least. We tend to avoid the area though, why? There's nothing there but bad memories," Boulderpaw's eyes grew dark and Scorch was close enough to just perceive the light shudder that ran through him.

That's what I'm counting on. The grim thought gave her a rush of reckless excitement. To go where no other cat dared, to walk upon

the haunted and forbidden ground, it filled her with the sense of adventure and daring that she recalled from when she was a kit, splashing dangerously deep into the ocean.

"Can you take me there?" she asked, trying not to let her wild feelings be perceptible in her voice.

She could feel Boulderpaw turn his head to look at her, for she could no longer see anything in the black rain. "You really ask the most ridiculous things... But I guess there's no harm, but won't your friends be missing you?" the tom inquired curiously. To Scorch,, it felt like he was just trying to push on that slim thorn in her mind.

"Naw, they're not expecting me back anytime soon," Scorch tried to coat her nervousness with casualness. She sensed Boulderpaw wasn't content with the answer and had suspicions, but he didn't say anything.

"Lets go," he mewed, standing up and stepping into the downpour.

"What? Right now? In the rain?" Scorch thought he must be crazy. She couldn't see her paw in front of her nose! How could they possible travel like this?

"Yes, its the best time to go right now, no one will see us, and the rain will wash away our scents," Boulderpaw mewed pointedly.

Scorch admitted to herself that he had a point. If they wanted to be secretive, it was best to go now before the rain let up. But she still had some doubts as she carefully got to her still unsteady paws. "Are you sure you can find your way?" she asked edging slowly out of the shelter.

"Sure, I spend most of my time in the forest. I know it better then the camp," Boulderpaw mewed, waving his invisible tail in front of her nose so that she could follow him.

"Fine, I'll trust you then," she sighed, closing her eyes against the stinging rain since it made no difference if her eyes were open or closed. They set off in the dark, driving rain.

Scorch had her ears flattened and her eyes squinted closed.

However it did nothing to prevent the icy rain from slicing her skin where the wind worked to lift her short fur coat. She desperately followed Boulderpaw's tail that brushed her whiskers just out of reach.

She whimpered as small pellets of hail were flung at them. Ripping through the remaining leaves on the trees overhead and hitting them. Scorch shivered, soaked to the bone and feeling lost in the turbulent storm with its wild wind howling around them and crashing the trees together like old bones striking out.

Why did I agree to this? We'll be lucky if we don't get hit by a falling branch! But she sensed no fear from Boulderpaw, instead, he seemed quite content in the stormy weather. A calm pool of confidence she sensed right in front of her that kept her nerves at bay.

The ground under-paw had turned muddy and slippery with dead leaves caught up in little muddy rivers. The little squall had turned into a full-on tempest boiling above their heads. She grunted as her front, black paw slipped and she barely caught herself in the dark from getting a face-full of mud.

A blinding white flash in front of her eyes showed Boulderpaw a few steps ahead, his gray coat damp, and his blue eyes looking back at her with a mischievous look. She barely had a moment to ponder quietly his strange infatuation with the storm before the resounding boom shook her insides and made her stiffen in fear.

It was so loud she wondered how the ground did not split in two and she did not shatter into a million pieces. She couldn't cry out to Boulderpaw, she was petrified. In the next flash she didn't see him and all she could do from panicking was clamp her paws over her ears and scrunch her eyes tight.

She sat on the muddy ground, silent, hot tears squeezing out of her eyes. *Why..? Why do I always end up alone in the dark?* The rumblings and flashing went on over her head and she curled tightener and tighter, trying to keep her frantic heart-beat under control.

"Hey? Are you taking a nap? Get up!" she ceased her sniffling

immediately and looked up. The next flash of lighting showed Boulderpaw's head right above hers, eyes glowing with life. "Odd time to take a snooze," he commented with amusement, nudging her to her paws.

"I wasn't sleeping," she mumbled, wondering whether to be embarrassed that he'd seen her give in to her weakness or relieved that she was no longer alone.

"Well lets get moving, the storm is just hitting its climax and we're almost to the battlefield," Boulderpaw mewed with unprecedented cheerfulness. "Come on," Boulderpaw laughed so gaily they may as well have been in broad daylight with everything perfect in the world instead of at midnight with a storm raging all around them.

As he pulled her to his side, sheltering her from the worst of the driving rain she felt the need to defend herself as she no longer felt scared. "Just so you know, I laid down because I lost sight of you and I didn't know where you were, so I was just getting some rest while waiting for you," Scorch didn't really consider this a lie, since it was, essentially, a half-truth at the very least. But it did convince herself that she wasn't totally pathetic.

"Whatever you say," Bouldepaw purred. Scorch contemplated this new, cheery side of Boulderpaw. She hardly even noticed the lighting that flashed in the sky above them and the thunder that rumbled consistently like the angry growl of a cat in the clouds.

He's never looked so... happy before. Is it because of the storm? Or something else? She decided to leave this mystery to unravel itself or to go forever unsolved. Right now, she just enjoyed the knowledge that Boulderpaw was capable of immature joy.

"Here we are!" Boulderpaw stopped abruptly. Scorch stepped ahead of him and gasped as she found only air. Boulderpaw had already grabbed her scruff though and pulled her back, her paws slipping easily over the mud.

"I was about to say that there is a drop right here, since we're on a boulder that juts out from the hill, if we go alongside it slopes down," Boulderpaw mewed, nudging her to the right.

"I didn't notice any stone underpaw," Scorch mewed doubtfully, the texture had seemed soft and fuzzy.

"The boulder is covered with moss from the recent rain, and there's an old, rotting, mossy log right there too," Boulderpaw explained, his voice wasn't as high anymore as the wind died down. But the lighting and thunder continued to plague the land.

Scorch felt it the moment she set paw on the clearing that was home to the battlefield. The strong, depressing air that hung over the deserted area was stifling. Now even dumb little creatures like mice dared not come here. Boulderpaw stayed behind, she could feel the melancholy mood coming over him mixed with righteous fury.

Scorch stepped onto a path of dirt. She imagined she could still smell the blood and when she looked down, a flash of lighting showed her the mud was reddish-brown, as if even six moons of weather hadn't erased the evidence of the disaster that had befallen the Clans.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, a warm puff of fumes amidst the drenching rain. She closed her eyes and let herself sway with the lonesome whistle of the rain and her heartbeat mingled with the now rhythmic patter of the black raindrops.

She could feel it, and she concentrated on that dark, ominous feeling the land gave off. Her soul shuddered as she started to hear it, with her eyes still closed, the echoing cries and shrieks of battling cats pouring their life in blood waves upon the ground.

She opened her eyes. It was dark, it was raining, but it wasn't the time where she'd been standing there with Boulderpaw behind her. Cats swarmed all around her, grappling with each other ungracefully on the muddy ground. But she could sense the purpose of each one, a sharp contrast which told her which side each cat was on.

She flinched as a spatter of blood splashed onto her and she looked around, aghast at the cruel brutality Pinefur's cats were showing. She felt her eyes draw themselves to Pinefur. Even though she'd

never seen him before, she knew this was him. He had a copper-brown coat slicked down with rain and blood and his green eyes shone sickly as the flashes of lighting lit up his crimson-stained fangs.

He held a cat under his paws, claws hooked in a cruel grip on the helpless cat's throat. "Tonight, we take the Clans! Power is ours!" He yowled the words to the sky which thundered its disapproval and the lighting flashed crossly in answer..

Scorch's eyes fixed on the cat he had under his paws again. It was an older dark gray she-cat with fuming yellow eyes as she vainly tried to sputter out curses as she was slowly being suffocated while at the same time losing a tremendous amount of blood from the deepening neck wound.

Scorch rushed for these two cats, she couldn't just watch such a painful death go through! Then she stopped. This was a memory, she couldn't do anything to change it. She watched with horrified wide eyes, unable to pull her gaze away as Pinefur slowly put an end to the snarling she-cat's life.

The life was snuffed out, easier than an ember in the rain. The she-cat fell back, dead. The blood flowed rapidly from the now open wound, but it was limp, like a stream flowing sluggishly downhill. It only flowed because it had to, there was no bubbling spring of life to push it out. Scorch swallowed hard, she was trembling again.

"Stormstar is dead!" the murderous cat yowled in jubilant triumph. The cry was echoed with joy from his troops, and painful sobs from his enemies.

That was Stormstar? She looked at the dead she-cat, rain mixed with blood and the fur had lost its shine in the heartbeat the life had gone out. The body was frail looking, no squirming spirit to fight on. Stormstar was gone, and with it seemed to the fighting chance the Clans had. The cats cowered, heartbroken and lost with their leader dead and deputy a betrayer.

Scorch looked once more at the leader, this time thinking of Skypool, the leader's daughter. *They had the same face, I can see it.*

What is it like? To have a loved one die? I suppose I really am one of the lucky ones.

Now the memory was fading as she started thinking and she gave a deep sighing, throwing away the sensation of her surroundings and she opened her eyes back to the quiet, stormy night she'd left for a few brief moments.

She looked around, the foreboding presence less pressing than before, as if it had given the land a great relief to share its painful burden. All the images flashed in her mind, everything she'd just seen; every cruel bite and painful claw strike, every life lost, it all rushed into her and soon she was struggling not to sniffle as her tears streamed down her face with the rain.

"Scorch?" the murmured question danced in her ears like the rain. How good it felt to have a cat to care for her!

Right now she didn't care what Boulderpaw would think, she just wanted some other cat to know. She whirled around and pressed her face into Boulderpaw's wet shoulder, letting her sobs gain a voice. After the emotions died down and she no longer felt the need to cry them away, she stepped back.

The pale gray light told her it was approaching dawn and they needed to get moving, but she wasn't going to leave without telling Boulderpaw everything. So right there, with the lingering rumbles of thunder, she poured out to Boulderpaw all about her strange ability and all she'd just heard.

She was worried at first he wouldn't believe her, and he seemed to have a disbelieving look at first as she described chasing phantom cats at the beach. But when she got to when she'd seen cats in the ShadowClan territory, the look was cautiously half-believing.

And by the time she concluded what she'd just seen in the clearing they were in, and the tears welled back up in her eyes, he looked abashed and at a loss of words. "Scorch... I..." he couldn't get any more out before he pulled her close and they took comfort in each others warmth as the rain continued falling down on the ghastly clearing.

Scorch cried, but couldn't stifle the warmth she felt as she found comfort in her new friend. *Even if this ability is a curse... I still think I'm lucky to have a cat that can believe and still support me. Yes... I am one of the lucky ones.*

Chapter 19: Past Transgressions

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Drip-drip-drip-drip. The water beaded on the holly leaf before plummeting to the ground, splashing into a hundred smaller droplets to be bead on the grass-blades. Scorch watched the process repeated over and over. Her eyes mesmerized by the simple, orderly little sequence. She could count by her heartbeat how long it took for the water to bead and fall.

She sighed and dropped her head, *why can't everything else be so simple, so steady?* At least Boulderpaw was still with her, sleeping heavily at her side, his face peaceful and his eyes gently closed as his whiskers twitched in his sleep.

At present they were back at the beach tree, the sun rising over a cloudy forest and climbing steadily toward sun-high. After they'd left the clearing, they had headed back to the border, the storm finally ending as they settled back down under the beach tree.

Boulderpaw had fallen asleep immediately, whatever strange adrenaline that had possessed him during the storm worn out. But Scorch couldn't fall asleep, no matter how tired she felt. *What do I know? After seeing that, I know I can't leave the Clans. Yes, I still want to find my parents, but this takes top priority for now.*

She turned over her black paw, catching one of the drops of water in her paw. *But how to go about it...?* She looked at Boulderpaw, he was mumbling something in his sleep and rolled over, his spine pressed against her side.

I can ask him what he thinks we should do, or I could try to see if I can ask Song or a StarClan cat. But I also need to figure out what I want to do about Painted and the others. I want to go back, but I... I don't know what they'll think of my new decision.

By now she was growing drowsy, her eyes starting to close on their

own as she struggled to stay awake long enough to figure out what to do. But sleep was persistent and she finally admitted defeat and laid her head down on an outstretched leg, her breathing slowing and deepening in a soothing rhythm.

A moment later when she opened her eyes, she found herself in a warm,, sunny clearing. She looked around, eyes blurry and hurt by the bright yellow sunshine and rich green foliage. She took a deep breath of the warm air, and groaned slightly.

I recognize this scent! Can't I just sleep? I'm exhausted! But a cat had already stepped out to meet her, and she supposed this was as good an opportunity as ever. The cat that stepped out was a silver tom with black ears and hazel eyes. She thought his scent was surprisingly familiar.

"Who are you?" she asked politely, eying the stars glimmering in his fur and the glow in his eyes.

"My name is Smokepool," when he spoke, that's when Scorch connected him.

"You're that cat from ShadowClan territory, a few moons ago," stated Scorch, who recalled the night when she'd been drawn deep into ShadowClan territory.

"Yes, that was I," he nodded his head, and when he lifted his head, Scorch spotted the look of hope in his eyes as he looked at her. *But didn't he tell me I couldn't save the Clans?* Scorch decided for herself that dead cats were more confusing than living ones. *Does dying make you complicated or something?*

"Well, since you're here. I wanted to ask you something," Scorch took a deep breath and a step forward. "I want to help the Clans, do you know where I should start? And what I should do?"

Smokepool rested his hazel eyes on her, not giving her any answers but just making her squirm in her skin. "I can't tell you what to do, like I can't tell the sun where to shine. However, if you wish to bring a spark to the Clans, you must start in the shadows," Smokepool dipped his head, avoiding eye-contact and Scorch

couldn't pick up on any emotions with her sharp senses. He was perfectly composed. *I hate cats like that.*

But now Scorch had a more difficult time trying to decipher what had just been said. "Shadows? What do you mean? Do you mean starting with ShadowClan? Or at night? Or does it mean something else, like to start without any cat knowing?"

Smokepool cocked his head at her, mouth closed but his eyes conveyed a message to her as clear as day. *You must figure it out on your own.* "What kind of junk is this?! If you want me to help you, you have to help me too!" she cried, racing for the starlit tom.

As she reached a paw up to grab him, everything turned black and she felt as if she was tumbling down a long, dark tunnel with no up or down. "Hey! Quit hitting me!" She jerked awake with a gasp, eyes wide as she looked around.

She was back under the beach tree with Boulderpaw standing over her, holding her front paws pinned down against her chest. "You could have just woken me up," she grumbled, wrenching her paws away and standing up with a yawn, feeling surprisingly refreshed for having just dreamed of StarClan.

"I tried, but you wouldn't, see your ear?" Boulderpaw prompted and Scorch reached up, drawing her paw over her ear and bringing it back. A trace of blood was on her paw and she glared at Boulderpaw.

"You bit me! Jerk!"

"You were thrashing around, so I tried waking you up, but nothing worked! You must have been having one heck of a dream," he muttered, looking away as he sat down.

Scorch opened her mouth to tell him she'd been dreaming of StarClan, but then recalled how he'd reacted when she'd suggested him taking her to the Moonpool. *Perhaps its best to keep this to myself.*

She turned back to Boulderpaw and shrugged, "Sorry, I just was

having a bad dream," she excused the behavior, and it wasn't false that the last part of the dream had felt nightmarish.

Boulderpaw rolled his eyes, "Are you a kit?" he muttered under his breath.

Scorch whacked him on the head. "You must be blind, I am obviously still a kit."

"That's fantastic, I was worried you weren't," Boulderpaw sniffed.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded in a snippy tone.

"Nothing, you just don't seem to be into anything regular kits like," Boulderpaw shrugged, the annoyed look on his face turning passive.

"What are normal kits like?" Scorch was curious. She'd grown up without any playmates, and Moonkit had hardly seemed to be a normal kit.

"Huh? Well, kits play and eat all day, and they're really demanding," Boulderpaw nodded to himself with an air of importance his superior knowledge granted him.

"Really?" Scorch was slightly disgusted, thinking regular kits must be lazy brats.

Boulderpaw looked at her with a slight frown. "Yeah, didn't you have littermates like that at least?"

"No, I was the only kit."

Silence.

"Didn't you have any friends?" Boulderpaw suggested, his frown deepening as he looked down at her. Scorch shook her head, 'no.'

More Silence.

"Are you telling me you grew up all alone?"

Scorch rolled her eyes. "Of course not, stupid. I had my parents, and

than I had Painted, Mira, and Jump. I was never alone," she mewed, standing up and stretching.

"Well, where are your parents now? Did they leave?" Boulderpaw was looking more solemn now, dabbing his paw at a dripping blade of grass.

"They're in the same place they were when I left," Scorch answered with the uttermost certainty.

"So you left them? Why?" Boulderpaw was looking at her again, with a very perplexed look. Scorch had to wonder why he was asking all these questions.

"I left because I had to," she shivered as she remembered the storm. It hadn't been a choice, it had just ended that way. But she'd find them again, the thought of seeing her parents again warmed her through.

"Was it because of you power?" Boulderpaw inquired, his blue eyes looked sharper than usual, as if he were trying to find something in the dark.

Scorch was a little repulsed by that and drew back. "Huh? What are you talking about now? You know what, it doesn't matter, we need to figure out what we're going to do," she shook off the subject and found a breath of relief as Boulderpaw stopped pestering her about her past.

"How are we going to beat Pinefur?" Boulderpaw sighed the question and frowned.

Scorch shifted her paws. Boulderpaw started relaying a few ideas, but she knew none of them would work and she felt increasingly uncomfortable. "Uh, Boulderpaw, I actually had a feeling that we should start elsewhere..." she trailed off, searching for the answer in her feelings.

"What? Where?" Boulderpaw frowned at her with a displeased look.

"With... ShadowClan and RiverClan," Scorch wasn't sure why, but

she felt that was where they'd need to start. *Bring the spark to the Shadows*. Smokepool had told her to start in the shadows, and that's what felt right to her.

"Why with them? We know nothing about their situation! Not to mention I have no reason to help them," Boulderpaw protested.

"I-I know. It's a chance in the dark, but I have a feeling we have to start there," Scorch tried to explain her intuition.

Boulderpaw glowered at her for a moment and then heaved a heavy sigh. "Look, we're both tired, wet, and hungry. Lets meet up here tomorrow at sun-high and talk things over again. Sound good?"

Scorch admitted that it was an excellent idea. And it would give her time to think about how she felt about starting with ShadowClan and RiverClan. It would also be a huge relief to reconcile with Painted and Jump. *But will they reject me when I tell them my plans? Again?*

She had to find out how they felt because she cared about how they felt. But, this was not something she could not do just because they were uncomfortable with it. She wouldn't ask anything of them, just to let her do this and be willing to wait to leave until she was done.

"Okay, I'll be here tomorrow at sun-high," she promised Boulderpaw and they separated hurriedly as the sunlight stared peeping through the blanket of clouds to the saturated ground.

She headed toward where the den was, her heartbeat gradually increasing as she got closer and her nerves got so bad she started to feel nauseous. *I just... don't want to have to do this. I just want to forget Painted's words.*

"*Then Go*."

Scorch stopped abruptly, her heart thumping heavily as she recalled Painted's cold voice and colder eyes. *Just breathe, its not the end of the world if they don't understand*. But to her, right now, it felt like it would be the end of her world to be left all alone in this place.

Well, then, I'll just have to make them understand. Somehow, that thought wasn't very reassuring. She knew these cats, Jump could be persuaded with Mira's support, and she was sure Mira would be simple to convince to wait. But Painted had no problem opposing her sister and she was too stubborn to just admit she was wrong before and be willing to make it up to her.

She had no more time to think, as she came to the faint trail that led into the small clearing of the den. She stopped at the edge of the sun-spotted grass and looked anxiously at the den. Jump was right there, napping in the entrance of the den.

His dirty white fur rose and fell gently with his deep breaths and his frayed whiskers shivered in the breeze. Mira was probably inside the den still, so that just left Painted unaccounted for. When she breathed in, Painted's scent was a little stale. Out hunting maybe? She decided to wait until Painted came back before making an appearance, since Painted was the one she needed to convince the most.

Maybe it'd be best to convince them one at a time? But she wasn't ready to argue with them yet, she wanted to put it off for as long as she could. So she went to a pine-tree with lots of clustered branches and climbed up as quietly as she could so as not to wake Jump.

In the branches, she could still see the clearing, but she was protected from view by heavy shadows and lots of dark pine needles. She settled down as best she could on the branches and mused over what she would say and how she would convince them.

Maybe I'll tell them that I have to, or they'll send cats after me to kill me. No... lying is never a good idea. I guess I could make it sound like I have no choice, it may make them more understanding. The problem is that I do have a choice. Maybe I should just act defiant, like I don't gave a care about what they think; I'm doing this and they're going to like it!

As she ran out of ideas, she dozed off, coming back to reality as she setting sun was shedding red light through the trees and casting long shadows pointing toward the lake. She sniffed and yawned, rubbing at her eyes with a paw, just to stop as she realized it was covered in sticky pine-sap.

Aw, that's going to take forever to get out! Grumbling about it, she looked around blearily. But she was wide-awake when she saw Painted, Jump, and Mira in the clearing. Her first thought: *What's Mira doing out of the den?!*

She clambered clumsily over the branches until she had a better view and she pricked her ears, trying to hear what they were saying. Lucky for her, the words floated right up to her so she soon knew what they were doing.

"Come on, Mira, just try one step!" Painted urged, her tone sounded exasperated and impatient.

"Hey, Painted, clam down! Can't you see it hurts her?!" Jump defended his mate angrily.

Mira stood between the two bickering cats, her face contorted with pain and her broken leg being held, trembling, above the ground. *Those idiots!* Scorch hissed frustration as their argument elevated and they soon tackled each other and rolled around on the ground, neither hearing the whimper of pain Mira emitted when they bumped into her.

She couldn't believe how stupid Painted was to try to have Mira walk. Scorch had said quite clearly, on several occasions, that Mira shouldn't start walking for at least another moon! *They're going to make her lame for life! Not to mention that poultice on her leg is old and I can tell its rotting from here!*

Scorch couldn't bear to see Mira in pain over the others idiocy anymore. Climbing, or falling carefully, she hit the ground and entered the clearing, avoiding the still fighting morons. "Scorch?!" Mira's eyes widened as she spotted her.

Scorch smiled reassuringly and shook her head as Mira tried to call to Jump and Painted. "Leave them be, they'll give it up in a moment. But, more importantly, *why* are you out of the den? Walking?" Scorch asked, frowning seriously and examining the leg that was obviously causing great pain.

Mira frowned deeply. "Painted said that my leg won't get stronger

unless I use it."

"But I told all of you that it won't be safe to use for another moon!" Scorch wanted to cried in exasperation. What was the point of giving advice if it was just ignored?!

"Painted said that you'd just said that so that we couldn't leave sooner-" Mira broke off, looked around, then leaned down to whisper in her ear. "-I knew she was just spouting nonsense though. But Jump encouraged me to try at first, so..."

"Well, I don't think he's feeling like encouraging you now," Scorch retorted.

"True, okay, what do I do?" Mira asked, looking around.

"Well, I'd like Jump and Painted to help you back to your nest, but they seem a little... distracted at the moment. So I'll try to help you," Scorch mewed, frowning, pressing her shoulder up under the chest near Mira's broken leg. It worked quite well and Scorch thought that Mira didn't suffer too much as they laid her in her nest.

"Okay, I'll get some poppy seeds," Scorch mewed, looking for the small herb store she'd made. She shifted her moss nest around and frowned. "Uh...where are my herbs?" She looked questioningly at Mira and felt her heart sink to her stomach when she saw the nervous look on Mira's face. *Please don't tell me they threw them out!*

"I.. err.. well, Painted said I should eat them all before I try walking, so..." Mira trailed off nervously.

Scorch stared at her in frozen horror. *I take back my previous thought, I wish they had thrown them out instead of that!* She felt her heart start to flutter in panic. "Do you do everything your sister tells you?" she choked out.

"Well, she's usually right..." Mira was starting to look frightened though.

"Some of those herbs are not meant to be eaten!" Scorch groaned. "I

had nettle in that! Nettle is poisonous! Not to mention, eating too much of any herb will make you sick! And I had a lot!" she cried.

Now Mira looked as horrified as she felt. "Why did you have a poisonous herb in your supply?!" Mira cried.

"Because its not poisonous as an ointment! No, wait here, I'm going to go get an herb to help," Scorch mewed hurriedly as Mira starting squirming. "When did you eat those?!" she demanded.

"Just before you showed up," Mira mewed, then made a face, "I think I'm starting to feel it..."

Scorch looked at her, feeling her heart thump wildly. *Why did I wait to come?! If I'd come down when I first arrived, I could have kept this from happening! But no, I had to be scared! Well, now I'm even more scared!*

Rushing out of the den, she passed the still battling cats and wondered how they hadn't heard their distressed cries from the den. *Darn them! They can't even keep their sense for the better part of a minute! And they call me the kit!*

She searched around the surrounding woods frantically, looking for an herb her mother had taught her about. She'd seen it before, but never used it. She spotted it at last, its tiny yellow flowers reminded her of its... distasteful effects. But it was effective, nonetheless.

She grabbed a bunch, careful not to bite down on it and rushed back to the den. By this time, she could hear Mira's groans and Jump and Painted were running around frantically now. This time they spotted her as soon as she stepped into the clearing.

"Scorch! Mira-she's- I don't know, but-" Jump kept breaking off frantically, looking more scared then a kitten in the dark.

"I know, I've got something to help," Scorch mumbled her words soothingly for Mira's sake, but she glared as harsh as she could at them.

She rushed to the den and tried to steady the writhing she-cat, not wanting Mira to hurt her leg anymore. "Hold on, open your mouth

and eat these," Scorch mewed, feeding the desperate she-cat the yarrow. *Its probably best that I don't tell her what it does*... But she hardly had time to take a breath before Mira started retching everything out of stomach.

She groaned inwardly as her moss nest was filled with half-chewed leaf pulp, green and slimy. The stench was pretty bad too. But when Mira had finished the expulsion of the herbs, the gray tabby was panting but had stopped withering.

"You feel better now?" Scorch asked gently.

"Yes..." Mira sounded weak and tired, but she would be okay now.

"Good, now, I probably don't need to tell you this, but don't ever eat something you're not sure is safe, no matter what any cat tells you," Scorch reprimanded her.

Mira laughed weakly, "A kit lecturing me, I must have been really stupid."

"I would have hoped you'd realized that by now!"

Mira laughed a little more strongly than sighed tiredly. "I've learned my lesson, I'm never going through that again," Mira sighed.

"Well, good, you rest now, I'll take care of the rest," Scorch tapped her paw to the ground and turned around to exit.

The shadows were falling even more thickly now, and Jump's and Painted's green eyes were glowing with worry. "Is she alright?!" Jump demanded the moment he spotted her.

Scorch gave a long sighed, "She'll be fine if she rests and doesn't eat anything till morning." Jump tried to push past her but she stopped him with a look. "Leave her be for now, she's sleeping. Right now, I want to know what the heck you two thought you were doing," Scorch growled. "Were you trying to kill Mira?!" she hissed.

Jump looked horrified but Painted growled. "It wouldn't have killed her! She'd have gotten over it!"

Scorch looked at Painted, how could any cat be so stubborn? Painted had looked just as worried as Jump a moment ago! "If you were lucky the effects of those herbs would have worn off in eight days, but she'd probably have starved to death by then," Scorch mewed in a low, soft tone that was more threatening than a growl.

Painted looked away with a sigh. "Well, you finally came crawling back, huh?" Scorch looked at her incredulously, and even Jump had the sense to glare at Painted.

"You're ridiculous," Scorch sighed, almost amused by Painted's rudeness.

"Well, did you taste the stars?" Painted scoffed.

Scorch rolled her eyes, *I get that it's hard for her to admit that she was wrong, but this is just crazy denial, I doubt her mental sanity*. "Yes, I did, actually," Scorch answered her anyways, remembering the Moonpool.

"And? What do they taste like?" Jump prompted, a little curious sounding.

Scorch considered for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't explain it, its like nothing else I've tasted."

"Yeah, right, you can't taste stars! Stop acting like that!" Painted growled.

"I will, when you stop acting like an ungrateful kit," Scorch retorted.

Painted growled and shook her head, stomping off. "What is her problem?" Scorch grumbled, the feelings of defiance that had sparked during the fight died off, leaving her with a cold and miserable feeling that's inevitable when you argue with someone you care about.

"She's been antsy ever since you left, she almost went to track you down a few times. She was really torn feeling earlier," Jump explained, looking uncomfortable and avoiding her gaze.

"What's the matter?" Scorch asked, covering a yawn with her paw.

"I, uh, was wrong to drive you out. I'm sorry, I didn't really think you'd leave," Jump mumbled, nudging her awkwardly in a sign of apology.

Scorch smiled, feeling warmed by Jump's apology. "Its okay, I'm back now. But if Painted was so worried, why is she so angry now? And being such a jerk?" Scorch grumbled.

"Don't let it get you worked up. She probably blames herself for what happened more than you blame her. She'll come around after she realizes everything's okay," Jump yawned.

"Well, I'll take your word for it. I'm not going to chance my luck with her right now. But could you do me a favor?" she asked, looking up at the frazzled tom.

"Yes, of course," Jump nodded. *I think that's the first time he's ever been complaint.*

"My moss is covered with Mira's vomit, drag it out and bury it far away from here, please?" Scorch turned away as soon as she'd made the request and headed out to gather moss for a new nest, ignoring Jump's disgusted complaints.

She headed west, away from the Clans borders. She was too tired to get into trouble right now. She shivered as she walked through the trees, the air was cold enough to make her ears and paws hurt and she shivered as the breeze ruffled her fur, looking for chances to chill her even more.

She pricked her ears as she heard the splash of water. *Where there's water, there's moss!* She headed toward the sound and soon found a small stream, not even a tail-length wide, but there was an old stump of a tree that was covered in moss along the stream.

Smiling happily, she started tearing the moss away, squeezing the moisture out. She worked for awhile until her paws were soaked and freezing. *That's probably good enough, I need to get back soon or I'll fall asleep*. She gathered the moss and turned away.

Crack! She paused, hearing the snap of a twig behind her. She

turned, her eyes searching the dense shadows for movement. She didn't see anything, and she didn't scent anything but the cold air. But she sensed something, her belly tingling with the sense that there was something out there.

But she wasn't scared, her senses told her that this creature was powerful, but did not mean any harm. "Come out! I know you're there! She demanded, dropping the moss.

There was a moment of silence and then she spotted movement. A large, dark yellow tom cat appeared. He held his head steadily and his orange eyes were unreadable. "You are quite the sharp kit to notice my presence," he spoke in a low, pleased tone that Scorch felt drawn to. No, that wasn't it, she felt drawn to this cat in general.

I wonder why? She tilted her head at him and pondered her feelings. "Who are you?" she asked, staring at him curiously. *Why do I feel like this? Its so strong, its like I just know he's special... Is it because of my ability? Does the earth recognize him as special, so I do as well?*

"My name doesn't matter, but you may tell me yours," the yellow tom invited, sitting down.

"Well, that doesn't seem very fair," Scorch responded. "How about if I tell you mine, you tell me yours? That sound fair?" she proposed.

The tom purred deeply and nodded, his orange eyes amused. But there was a bitter look in the eyes, a look of misery that he tried to hide. Scorch doubted any cat but her would ever notice it, but this was not the time to wonder about things, she had a deal to complete. "My name is Scorch," she announced.

"Hmm... Are you a Clan cat?" the tom asked.

"No, not really. But you have to tell me yours now, cat," Scorch demanded. "Its only fair."

"Of course, its only fair," the cat chuckled to himself. "Alright," he looked up and stared her in the eye. "My name was once Sunstar, but it has long ceased to have any meaning... Back before my

mistakes caught up to me."

Scorch stared at him, mouth open wide. She may not live in a Clan, but Leafpaw had told her quite a bit. Like how only Clan leaders have, 'star,' in their name. *This cat... he's a Clan leader?! But why is he here, instead of his Clan? What happened? Is this why I feel like he's special?*

But Scorch shivered and refrained from asking. He said it was before his mistakes caught up to him, did he... *do something that made the Clans get captured by Pinefur and Nightwing? If so, what then? And why isn't he paying the price with the rest of his Clan?*

Chapter 20: No Sunshine

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Sunstar... The name shivered through her like a stream rounding its way through a forest and flowing through patches of shade and sunlight, cold and warm. The large, dark orange tom sat placidly in front of her, seemingly amused by this rare disruption of usual routine.

"Y-you mentioned the Clans," Scorch stuttered, finding it rare for her to become tongue-tied and was slightly frightened by the new experience. *Snap out of it! Get it together!* She berated herself mentally and tore herself out of the dark labyrinth of confusion that led to nowhere.

"Yes, I did," Sunstar affirmed with a nod of his head.

" Are you-"

"No, I simply know of them; nothing else. And you? I assume that you have a knowledge of the Clans to ask such a question," Sunstar inquired.

Scorch observed him for a moment, contemplating the best way to ease the story out of him that he was hiding, for his lie showed he was obviously hiding something. "Yes, I have had some contact with them," she mewed slowly, even though the darkness that was growing spurred her with a sense of urgency.

"Hmm, with who?" Sunstar spoke casually, but Scorch immediately spotted the error in his question and the hunger in his eyes.

"Why would that matter if you only know of them?" Scorch attempted but failed, probably miserably, to keep the triumph out of her tone.

Sunstar noticed, for his eyes narrowed and he looked at her more

sharply. "I am not sure why that would matter to a non-Clan cat, or why you would seek that knowledge out, but there is another matter I've been pondering. And I wish to ask, if it would be alright," Sunstar mewed, and his politeness confirmed to Scorch his Clan-cat background.

"Fine, but to continue the spirit of fairness, I can then ask my own question about you," Scorch agreed.

Sunstar nodded his agreement, looking slightly less amused then before and not as happy, as if the disruption in life had turned from amusing to tedious. "I would like to ask if you ever met a cat named Rainstone before, your accent and scent reminds me of this particular cat," Sunstar's words froze Scorch and that strange sensation of fear and anger swarmed like cold fire through her veins.

Glaring at Sunstar, she regarded him coldly before answering. "Yes," it was the crisp answer and the message was clear; ask no further.

Sunstar now looked intrigued, and slightly unnerved as if he didn't understand her tone. Which made sense since Scorch didn't understand why she felt like that when some cat asked after her mother. But he now invited her to ask her question without fear.

So she sucked up a breath and asked, "Why did you leave the Clans?"

Sunstar froze, looked at her for a long silent moment, bent down his head to licked his chest fur, got up, and left without another word. Scorch huffed and stamped her front, black paw in frustration. *He said he'd answer any question! Liar!*

She considered going after him, but the sky was almost completely black now, just the faintest rim still showed a glowing blue sky. So she decided she'd come back at a different time, since it'd been such a long day.

Picking up her moss, she went back the way she'd come, pondering this new cat in her mind, this new face in the gallery of memories. This memory was bright to her, gilded iridescently as if her mind

already recognized it as important. The only other cat that had made such an impression on her had been Boulderpaw. *So, what do the two share in common?*

It didn't seem like there could be much in common; Boulderpaw was young, Sunstar was obviously on the older side of life. Boulderpaw had dramatic mood swings between depressed and jubilant, while Sunstar seemed to command a fairly solid temperament. Boulderpaw was loud and forward in a problem, Sunstar had just displayed that he chose to walk away from a problem.

Not very alike at all, almost exact opposites, but something stuck in my mind about both of them, I sense that special spark in them. But where? And what is it? She proceeded to wonder if things didn't make sense because she was so young, or because they just didn't make sense in general.

By now the sky was fully cloaked in thick blackness and clouds must have rolled in so only a few patches of clustered stars peeped through the darkness and the moon was hallowed by a thick wreath of clouds that rolled over it continuously, forcing the moon into a game of hide-and-seek.

Scorch shivered as the cold air washed over her, though she was grateful that it helped clear her head and she took a few moments to enjoy the clear air. She sighed though, as she started seeing some of her mirages appearing around her. She honestly didn't care much for her, 'special,' ability, but now that she knew what it was, it seemed considerably less frightening.

She stopped to watch a particular mirage that had caught her eye, it was a familiar looking gray she-cat. *Hmm? That face reminds me of Boulderpaw, and the eye color is exactly the same!* She wondered if this cat was possibly an ancestor of Boulderpaw, as these mirages were past cats. *But, how is this helpful? How does the past effect the present? And its not like I'm seeing anything really important... just cats going about their daily lives, just like cats of the here and now!*

Feeling increasingly frustrated, Scorch hurried home and came upon the den as midnight began. She pulled the moss to the den

and peeked her head in. Mira was still sleeping soundly, the sickness nothing but a bad memory to fade into the depths of memory.

Jump, surprisingly, was not sleeping at Mira's side, but instead slept closer to the entrance, a good tail-length away from Mira. *He probably didn't want to disrupt her accidentally*. Scorch scanned the den again and frowned; Painted wasn't there.

She turned her head around and looked around the small clearing. She didn't see anything and Painted's scent was growing stale, as if she hadn't returned since Scorch had last talked to her and she'd stormed off. *I hope she isn't in any trouble*, Scorch chewed her lip, undecided.

Painted wasn't usually stubborn or stupid enough to hold a tantrum for this long. But Scorch could understand if Painted was feeling so flustered that she just needed to spend the night alone. Finally Scorch decided she was just too tired to do anything of consequence that night and she quickly formed a crude shaped nest and slipped into it, not to wake again until almost sun-high the next day.

...

Scorch yawned as she stretched in the pale sunlight. She blinked and looked around, drawing in on the yellow grass and the accumulating pine needles on the ground. Mira was still in her nest sleeping and Jump had roused her around dawn to say he was going hunting. He had not yet returned even though it was nearing sun-high.

What should I do? The rumble in her belly answered for her and she left to hunt, telling Mira what she was doing. She paced through the tall pine trees, she knew some cats felt depressed by the hushed silence and deep shadows. But she felt it was relaxing; a sleepy quiet and a blanketed shadow.

Is it because of my ShadowClan roots? Or because I've been living here for over a moon now? She wasn't sure, but the pine smell in the air she felt would always be her home. She sniffed the air, making sure she wasn't too close to the Clans border, since she had headed in

that direction, and set down to hunt.

It didn't take long to track a vole scent trail to a stream and find it scuttling along the bank. With a quick, precise movement she had it and she gulped it down appreciatively, since she couldn't even recall the last she'd eaten.

Feeling much better now that she was all refreshed, she had time to think about Sunstar, and the meaning of the meeting. She wandered through the forest for a while, straightening out her thoughts about what she did and did not know about Sunstar.

She paused when she came upon a glade that she hadn't seen before. It was half encircled by tall bushes that looked like they bore berries in the right season and a stream ran alongside the other half, leaving just a narrow trail open. Scorch entered, tilted her head and listened, surprised when she couldn't hear anything, not even little creatures in the bushes.

Strange, but I like how the air feels here... it feels heavy and warm... As if things just dwell here without ever moving. She moved into it and sat down in the middle, the wind rushing above her head, thanks to her windbreak of bushes and the faint sunlight pooled on her and the sandy-grassy floor she sat upon.

So... back to what I know about Sunstar. She did know that he was a Clan cat, probably a leader due to his name; She did not know which Clan he had been in or why he'd left. She knew that he was uncomfortable when confronted about the Clans, but he did still care about what happened to them.

Strange cat, for sure, full of contradictions.. Then she paused, feeling like she was forgetting something. *Its almost sun-high, wasn't there supposed to be something going on at sun-high...? Was it*... She racked her brain and couldn't come up with an answer.

Sighing, she walked over to the stream. Now that she was closer, it was less like a stream, and more like a trickle of water that was flowing away from a spring somewhere. Regardless of where it came from, she bent down and lapped a few mouthfuls to wet her mouth. She paused and looked at a glitter that had caught her eye.

It was a stone, shimmering with minerals as the water washed over it and the sun hit it in just the right way. *What a pretty little stone, and its the same color as Boulderpaw's eyes!* She scooped it out of the water with a paw and held it close. As she held it, the content smile melted away.

I was supposed to meet Boulderpaw at sun-high! Oh no! She looked up frantically, it was definitely sun-high right now and it would take awhile to get to the meeting pace. Blaming her stupidity she let out over the forest floor, heading as quickly as she could toward the meeting place.

Had she been full grown, she would have made it in only a few minutes, but for her and her short little legs, it took four steps to make one stride of a full-grown cats. Evidently, this made it take four times longer and sun-high was wearing thin when she finally reached the beach tree, gasping for breath.

Boulderpaw was standing there, looking at her in annoyance, and she just collapsed down in front of him, on her stomach, gulping in air.

"Yeesh, calm down, the air isn't going anywhere," Boulderpaw grumbled, sitting down and poking her heaving side.

Scorch tried to speak, but was so out of breath that she just managed an inaudible sentence that broke into a cough at the end.

"Well, get your breath back before you try to talk again. Geez, killing yourself because you were late; how much of a ditz are you?" grumbled Boulderpaw.

It itched her so much that she couldn't respond with a rebuttal, so she just gave the best glare she could. The effect was greatly weakened with the fact that she was collapsed on the ground with Boulderpaw looking away.

Sighing, she rolled on her back, squinting her eyes against the sunlight as her heaving breaths slowly lessened and her heartbeat returned to normal. "Well, I'm better now. So, what do you think we should do?" Scorch asked, offering him first chance at presenting an

idea for their course of action.

Boulderpaw kept his eyes on the horizon and let out a long breath. "I don't know, its such a big task and we're so small... can we even make a difference?" the melancholy words weren't completely surprising to Scorch, but it stirred a deep feeling in her and she jumped from her back to her paws and stood in front of Boulderpaw, staring him straight in the eyes. She wanted him to hear what she said.

"Well I believe that we *can* make a difference, can't you see? Even a small splash has its ripples, we *will* change something, even if its just the thoughts of a few cats. But there's one thing I can assure you, nothing will happen if we do nothing, and I'm sick of doing nothing! This is a risk I'm willing to take, whether you are or not," Scorch's voice rose with each word and she felt emotion rushing to her throat.

It wasn't that the words themselves were stirring, but it was what they represented. For Scorch, those words told what she had dedicated her life to for at least the next few moons. Those next few moons would mean something; to her, to Boulderpaw, to the Clans, to Sunstar... She believed that, and she needed Boulderpaw to believe it too.

But his eyes stayed blank, there was no spark, no glow of hope. The gray-blue eyes stayed quiet, no thoughts or life behind them. There was no sunshine reflecting off of them. And then Scorch backed up a pace, a strange feeling in her belly.

It wasn't coming from her, she was sensing something from Boulderpaw, a deep sadness that was so sharp it was painful. She swallowed hard and looked at him, "wha-did something happen?" she asked hesitantly, searching his face earnestly.

Boulderpaw looked away, then at his paws, and finally back at her, his mouth open and eyes longing. He wanted to tell her, she could sense that, but something held him back.

This hurt even more, that he didn't feel like he could trust her. It sent a pang right through her chest, she wanted him to trust her,

they were friends, and she knew he was special. She wanted him to feel the connection, why couldn't he?

"Please," she begged in a whisper, looking up pleadingly into his eyes, "Just trust me."

Boulerpaw gave a slight nod, and if on signal, a cold breeze rushed over them, sending the stuffy, hot air that had built up between them away and Boulderpaw began to speak. "Yesterday, Pinefur came to the Clan again. He was very angry, said something about cats breaking the rules..." Boulderpaw looked at his paws and guilt flashed across his eyes, causing Scorch to wonder.

"Anyways, he said-he- he said," Boulderpaw started to stutter. "He said that because we were breaking the rules, he would teach us a lesson. So, at dusk, he took the all the apprentices to the WindClan border where all the WindClan apprentices were already waiting, and several of Pinefur's most loyal bodyguards..."

Now Boulderpaw shivered. "He turned to us and asked which one of us had been wandering off and breaking the rules. Of course, no cat answered. So Pinefur, he," now Boulderpaw stopped and sniffed, emotion caused by memory overwhelmed him and Scorch could feel it sharply as well. She pressed against him and encouraged him on.

But Boulderpaw just cried. Scorch was shocked, surprised, and a little frightened. She had thought that even if Boulderpaw was difficult, he was strong. But right now, sobbing and shaking with tears streaming down, he looked completely *broken.*

"He took two ThunderClan apprentices and two WindClan apprentices and he told them to fight one-on-one to the death," Boulderpaw sobbed. "But not ThunderClan against WindClan, he had ThunderClan against ThunderClan, Firepaw killed Leafpaw!"

Scorch froze, her mind froze, she felt like ice was slowly covering her, hardening into stone. She couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't blink, could hardly breath. Then the cold sheet over her shattered and she was standing there, crying with Boulderpaw as hard as she could.

She couldn't believe it, Leafpaw, the warm red she-cat that had taught her all about the Clans and many of her skills. How could she be dead? How could she have been killed for something she didn't do? Killed by her own friend, nonetheless! How could such a monster force two young cats, two young friends, to *kill* the other?

It was heart-sickening! But the beach tree had a tender heart and sheltered the two heart-broken cats and allowed them to cry themselves dry in peace. And exhausted from the long crying-session, Boulderpaw fell asleep, and Scorch fell asleep crying, feeling sorrow heavier on her now that the shock was fading and the harsh force known as reality was sinking in.

...

Scorch moaned softly, wondering why she felt so horrible. And, she also wondered what the heavy weight on her back was. Opening her eyes, she quickly closed them as the glare of the sun hit her sensitive eyes. She slowly opened them again, keeping them cast downwards until she'd grown used to the brightness again.

Now she looked up to the weight on her back. The pressure was caused by a certain sleeping Boulderpaw. "Gosh, you're heavy," she grunted then looked at her paws, wondering why they were wet. *Oh yeah...*

Her mood was strangled and oppressed by the memory that Leafpaw was no longer in this world. She felt a hot chill over her heart and a few more forgotten tears trickle out and she sniffed, rubbing her wet eyes unhelpfully with her wet paws.

She looked up at the beach tree she lay beneath, her soul steeping in sorrow as she remembered Leafpaw sitting up in the tree looking down at her with a playful smirk as she teased her about her poor tree-climbing. She could almost see the outline of the young red she-cat...

Wait. She looked up again. She wasn't imagining it. She could really see Leafpaw. The memory of Leafpaw at least. It brought sorrow to her, but she felt a bubble of laughter anyways as Leafpaw, showing off, hopped around daintily and then slipped, catching herself just

in time but was left hanging by her forepaws in a most undignified position.

I remember that, it was one of the first times I trained with her, she was so bright and carefree. She changed during the training sessions, she grew more depressed, and I told her to do something! But she didn't, and I didn't, and now she's gone...

Scorch looked at her paws determinedly. She would do something, she wouldn't let more cats like Leafpaw vanish without putting up a fight. She looked up at Bouldepaw, he was sleeping peacefully, but with a troubled frown.

"Come on, Boulderpaw, time to get to work," she grunted, forcing her shoulders up and rolling him off her back.

"Hmm..." he groaned softly, mumbling a few inaudible words and batted a paw at her lazily.

"Come on," she grunted, nudging him roughly. "Time to get up, you lump." Boulderpaw yawned and rolled over on his side. Muttering under her breath, Scorch tried to roll him onto his paws, but he was surprisingly heavy and she gave up, draping herself over his side and panting.

"You're so weak," Bouldepaw mewed, opening one eye at her.

"Jerk!" Scorch kicked at him gently. "You were awake the whole time, weren't you?" she accused him, trying to glare, but glad that he looked less depressed again, a glimmer once again shining in the very depths of his eyes.

"Yes, I was," Boulderpaw yawned again in an unapologetic manner.

"And not even an apology," Scorch waved her tail in the air, exasperated.

"Well, sorry, but if you hadn't noticed, I'm not a very apologetic cat," Boulderpaw excused himself and got to his paws, shaking out his fur vigorously.

"I had, actually noticed, hence the fact that I was not surprised,"

Scorch mewed, closing her eyes and falling on the ground on her back.

"What's with you? You tell me to get up, and then you fall down," Boulderpaw shook his head and looked at her.

"But the sky is so pretty," Scorch murmured, getting distracted with her kit-like tendencies.

"It is," Boulderpaw agreed. "But you need to open your eyes to look at it," he pointed out.

"True enough," Scorch giggled lightly and looked up at the sky. It was a very pale blue, a faint veiling of clouds encircled the horizons and the sun appeared to be misty and far-away. "Does the sun look... distant today?" Scorch asked. She couldn't feel the warmth of the sun and the light looked so pale and white, it wasn't the usual yellow sunshine.

"I guess even the sun is sad and is recovering," Boulderpaw murmured, flicking a fallen leaf along the ground wearily.

"Its like the sun is out, but there's no sunshine," Scorch whispered.

"Sometimes, that's how life feels for me. There's pleasure, but no happiness," Boulderpaw added his observation quietly, in a thoughtful tone that spoke of countless hours of wandering thoughts.

Scorch looked at him, his fallen gaze, his defeated look. It didn't belong to him, he belonged to something greater then despair, and she would help him find it. Definitely. She wanted nothing more than to bring the sunshine back to his life, and the lives of all the Clans.

"I've got a plan for how to defeat both Pinefur and Nightwing," she mewed.

Boulderpaw looked at her, his ears pricking up a little. "I'm listening."

Scorch quickly relayed her plan. It wasn't solid, as it depended on a

few things, and Boulderpaw wasn't happy that she insisted on starting with defeating Nightwing, but as she gave her reasons, he grew more understanding.

"Nightwing is the most ambitious of the two, from what I've learned. Should he here that ThunderClan and WindClan are now separate Clans again, I'm confident that he'd act on that immediately," Scorch reasoned.

"I suppose so... But Pinefur is pretty ambitious as well, what do you think he'll do when he learns of ShadowClan and RiverClan's new freedom?" Boulderpaw challenged.

Scorch smirked, pleased with herself for thinking of this. "With any luck, he won't know. Remember? No cat in ThunderClan knew anything about Nightwing's acts really, and with ShadowClan and RiverClan free, the Clans can overturn Pinefur," Scorch mewed.

"And what if ShadowClan and RiverClan don't help?" Boulderpaw asked in a growl that spoke his suspicions.

"Then they will have to deal with being defeated by Pinefur, I can't make them see sense, I can only show it to them," Scorch mewed hotly. "But this is where another character comes in..." she told Boulderpaw about the added ally she had in mind.

"Having a Clan leader on our side would be good... even if it was a former Clan leader," Boulderpaw mused quietly.

"Exactly, I'm sure that we can't get ShadowClan and RiverClan on board with our plans without him," Scorch mewed. He was there ticket to freeing ShadowClan and RiverClan.

"But are you sure they'd listen to him? I don't know what happened, but I do know that he is the only surviving Clan leader, add the fact that he isn't suffering with his Clan, he may be received with hostility and a sense of betrayal," Boulderpaw worried.

"Well, its a chance we'll have to take. I'm quite sure those two Clans won't listen to a ThunderClan apprentice and a, 'rogue,' kit, even if my father used to be ShadowClan."

"When you say it like that, I doubt we really can do anything. I mean a kit and apprentice changing history? Its surely unheard of!" Boulderpaw exclaimed.

"Hey! There's a first time for everything, right? And if we try and fail, at least we can say that we did something to change things. No cat can blame us for sitting around and watching, and I don't know about you, but I'd rather try and fail then not do anything to help," Scorch mewed.

Boulderpaw snorted, "You say, 'try and fail,' but its more like try and die. We won't survive if we fail."

"Thanks," Scorch mewed dryly as shivers went through her. "I feel more confident now," she added more sarcastically.

"Sorry," Boulderpaw laughed, "But its true."

Scorch shook her head at him, jumping from her back to her paws. "I don't understand you. But we're in this together? Till the end?" she asked, holding her paw and turning the paw upwards toward him.

"What are you doing?" Boulderpaw eyes her strangely.

"Its a gesture that shows agreement," Scorch explained, frowning as she tried to recall where she'd seen it. *Oh! One of my mirages did it, and I thought it was appropriate*, she reminded herself. "Just put your paw on mine," she ordered.

Boulderpaw sighed but did it so that there paws were touching. "We're in this together as long as the sun shines."

Chapter 21: Counter-Attack

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"Why did we have to sneak out at niiiight," the word was prolonged as Scorch yawned.

"Because its the only time I can sneak away without being noticed," Boulderpaw answered. He was walking right in front of her, but his gray fur was hardly easier to see than a cloud in the night sky. The decimating shadows that spawned from the thick pines strangled the moon and starlight until only a few ghastly sheets of silver showed through in mangled angles.

Scorch was quiet for awhile longer, her eyes were too lazy to try to be of any help and the resounding silence was so lulling. She pricked her ears as a low grumbling sound echoed around them. Having been on the brink of sleep, her mind wasn't working fast enough for her to be scared or put it past herself that she'd just imagined it.

But she listened for it again and stiffened when it did indeed come again, just in front of them. She hurried to Boulderpaw's side. "Did you hear that?" she whispered in his ear.

It came again, even closer and now at her side. "I didn't eat today," grumbled Boulderpaw, sounding embarrassed.

It took a moment for Scorch to connect the words, but then her whiskers were twitching in amusement. "Well, why didn't you eat?" she asked as they padded along in the darkness.

"Cause' I didn't," Boulderpaw mewed unhelpfully but in a tone that told her clearly, however, that he didn't want to be questioned further.

"Well, you should have said something when we first set off and there was still light. Wait here," Scorch mewed, turning off the trail

they were following and creeping quietly in the shadows. Night critters were scurrying about and she soon picked up the near scent of a shrew.

Tracking it took only a minute, and catching it even less. She returned to where Boulderpaw was waiting impatiently and gave him the food. Scorch couldn't see his expression since it was so dark but she heard the gratefulness in his gruff, 'thank you,' and then the satisfying munch of him devouring the little rodent.

Scorch yawned again and stretched. Even though the quiet and atmosphere were peaceful and keeping her mind asleep, it really was far to cold out for her body to get too drowsy, The frosty air nipped her all over, and she was thankful that there was no wind. She hadn't stopped trembling since the sun had gone even without the usual bone-rattling breeze.

"How much further until we reach the place?" Boulderpaw asked. "I have absolutely no idea where we are, or what's more than three paw-lengths in front of me for that matter."

"Well, I'm about a tail-length in front of you. And we're almost there. Just a hop, skip, and a jump," Scorch encouraged. In reality, it was a little further, and still further until they reached their real target, but they'd still be there before midnight; which was almost upon them.

This particular late night adventure takes place five nights after Scorch's and Boulderpaw's agreement to help the Clans together. Scorch had insisted that they must find Sunstar as quickly as possible, but Boulderpaw had wanted to formulate the plan more so that they had a better chance at convincing the former leader. Hence the small delay.

But here they were, in the middle of the night in the freezing woods. Scorch would bet Painted would think she was crazier than the spotted she-cat already must think she was. And thinking of Painted, as she went along, Scorch's thoughts drew to that distressing topic.

She hadn't seen Painted for all five of those long days. Jump and

Mira reported that Painted always came back while she was gone and went to sleep after Scorch, and at the same time waking up before her. Once Scorch had half-awaken to see the disappearing white tail-tip, but that was it.

She wondered if Painted either hadn't forgiven her yet, or if Painted just didn't know what to think of her allegiance to the Clans. This had prevented Scorch from announcing her plans to help the Clan to anyone other than Mira who had shown concern about her safety but nothing else.

Though she seemed worried about something else when I told her... Her thoughts flew back to the moment. "*I am going to help the Clans. They can't seem to help themselves alone, and they don't deserve this*," she had told Mira all she knew about the dictatorship of Pinefur and Nightwing and Mira had looked sick with disgust.

"I'll allow you to help them as best you can on one condition. You cannot go dying on me, I won't allow it. You have to promise me that you will not put your life in danger in any circumstances." That's what Mira had made her promise. Scorch knew Mira didn't understand completely, so she had made the promise, telling herself that she would not purposefully risk her life; since she really didn't want to die either, but she wouldn't consider it a bad lie were she to break the promise.

Still, a lie is a lie, a familiar surge of uneasiness overtook her as she reminded herself that any lie was a bad lie, and a breaking down of trust between two cats. *Of course, that promise shows that she does not trust me to take care of myself. But is she really wrong?*

Scorch didn't think she was objective enough to truly judge if she was reckless or not, but she wouldn't consider her impulsiveness as recklessness either. *Well, I don't plan on dying. I still want to find my parents when this is all over with.*

She banished the guilty thoughts from her mind and took the lead as the came to the place where she'd met Sunstar. "He was just by this little stream," she mewed, approaching cautiously the melancholy babble of water. A flashing stream of black water in the dark of night laced over the ground.

"Here?" Boulderpaw was at her shoulder, his nose to the still air. "I can smell some cat scent, and it smells faintly of RiverClan, but he hasn't been here since sun-high at least, probably longer. Meaning this isn't particularly near his den," Boulderpaw grumbled.

"So we have to walk a little more, chin up! We're mostly there anyways," Scorch encouraged, feeling that Boulderpaw was growing more irritable as the temperature continued to drop and clouds rolled in on the breathless wind.

But she was growing colder as well, and her paws were alternating between painful pangs and numbness. She moved quickly, hardly putting her paws to the ground before picking them up again, in an effort to make them warmer. It only succeeded in wearing her out faster.

"Remember that we still have all the way back home too," Boulderpaw added after a few moments of silence. "And I have to travel further than you," his sharp mew pointed out.

Scorch didn't respond. He was right, this trip wasn't exactly ideal or enjoyable, but it had to be done. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, her trembling legs may have given the appearance that she was afraid, but she was too cold to be fearful. The sound was a lone creak of branches, which was odd since there was no wind to stir them.

"Yes, I did, do you think its him?" Boulderpaw whispered.

"Probably not, since its the middle of the night, but I don't smell anything other than us," Scorch responded with another hushed whisper.

"Of course, that's not saying much. This cold is killings scents faster than rain and wind together," Boulderpaw grumbled, shifting closer to her so that their ice-cold pelts were touching, conveying a sense of mutual security. Though Scorch doubted her paws could carry her far from danger should it affront itself.

They waited in a tense silent for a few moments, but no more sounds came and Scorch ventured forward away from Boulderpaw a

little to get a better look into the indigenous shadows.

"Careful," Boulderpaw whispered, and she could sense he was growing more tense and nervous. Something was setting him on edge, but she couldn't sense anything dangerous.

She was about five tail-lengths away from Boulderpaw and was fully enveloped in shadows by the time she caught wind of what Boulderpaw had evidently been feeling. Every fur stood up and the chills from the cold were quickly overtaken by the shudders of fear that gripped her with its piercing talons.

Jumping back toward Boulderpaw she was knocked over the head and sent tumbling to the ground. But she knew she'd escaped a worse peril as she felt knotted and hooked claws slide over her skin, just hardly scratching her.

She rolled on her to look upward at her invisible, skyward attacker. It was too dark to see clearly, but the round, glowing yellow eyes and resounding, "*Hoo-hoo*!" told her she'd been the planned dinner of an Owl.

"Lets get into some cover," Boulderpaw was standing over her, nudging her urgently to her paws and then dragging her along by the scruff when she didn't move fast enough for his sanctification. She was glad that Boulderpaw was alright, because her mind was still half-frozen with fear and chills were still going down her back.

By the time Boulderpaw pushed her under a juniper bush she was able to think clearly again. *That feeling though... I remember it, when I was chased by that fox on the beach. Its such a strange feeling, the knowledge that I am competing with a creature that has no sense of justice or moral inclination. Is that how mice feel? I don't wonder if they think like I do, its a situation of just survival against a blood-hungry, dangerous creature and its next meal.*

She continue to consider that if every creature just thought about survival in those terms if life would be simpler. The conclusion in her mind was that, yes; life would be simpler, but a whole lot scarier.

Those thoughts, putting her fear on a wide scale balanced by nature had helped calm her down considerably and the last shivers had mostly spent themselves out when she said they should move on again.

It was now midnight and they were behind schedule, but Scorch was encouraged that Sunstar's scent seemed to be growing stronger and that a trail, although vague, had formed itself in the form of smell. Scorch trotted forward happily, not at all annoyed that Boulderpaw grumbled about her being as helpless as a new-born rabbit when she was scared, since he stuck close to her side and she found some warmth in their close contact.

"That must be his den," she whispered as the scent grew considerably stronger in front of a worn-down gorse den. Patches of mud, twigs, moss, and leaves were stuffed in holes, but more holes showed through where the cold wind could rattle and faint skylight showed through.

"Hardly what I'd expect a Clan-leader to be living in," Boulderpaw mumbled.

Scorch noticed the awkwardness in his tone and looked at him. "You feeling okay? You sound a little queasy."

Boulderpaw shook his head, "Its nothing."

The tone said that there was definitely something. But Scorch didn't have a wish to interrogate him in the freezing cold and dark in front of Sunstar's den. So she let it slide for now, but she doubted she would let it rest for long.

"Okay, I'm going in," she mewed, stepping forward away form Boulderpaw with a shaky breath. Boulderpaw didn't say anything, though she wished he would insist on going with her. Away from his side, the cold seemed more vicious and her fears more numerous.

She stepped into the den of light and shadow, the light seemed to be placed at the most useless spots, illuminating the furthest corners of the den but leaving the walkway and most of the central space in

deep darkness.

An uneasy feeling had sprouted when she had left Boulderpaw's side, and now it bloomed. She could hear rough breathing, not the breathing of a sleeping cat, but the hoarse rhythm of a feral animal."Sunstar?" she mewed, hating herself for the way it trembled in the still air, betraying her fear even though her fear-scent had probably thoroughly established that fact already.

But no answer came, and she began to sense that whatever was in there (for there was indeed something else in there) was either not Sunstar, or a Sunstar that was not fully conscience, for there was no sense of confusion or recognition; just steady, growing malignant suspicion.

She flinched as a pair of wide, orange eyes opened at her, shining red in the dark light. She froze, awaiting words as the big wall of fur which she deemed, by scent, Sunstar, stood and loomed over her. She held her breath as the big tom bent down his nose toward her and she felt his legs on either side of her shoulders forcing her to be painfully aware that she was just a tiny kit which this massive tom could trample over quite easily.

"Scorch?" Sunstar's voice wasn't harsh or mean as she had expected from the previous signs he'd given.

"Yes?" she whimpered starting to tremble and wishing he had been mean sounding so that she had an excuse to run out of the den.

"The heck are you doing here?" Sunstar muttered under his breath.

"I-I came looking for you," Scorch stated, backing up a few paces so that she was not directly underneath him.

"In the middle of the night...?" Sunstar's tone suggested she was an idiot and she wasn't sure he was completely wrong.

"...Yes."

"I hope it was for some reason other than questions," Sunstar grumbled, sitting down in front of her. Scorch hesitated, focusing for a moment on the sensations she was getting from Sunstar. He

seemed much calmer, and the strange breathing and apprehension had vanished. But deeper than the surface, she could sense a turbulent stream of emotions.

Confusion, regret, despair... those are all those, fear too. But what's this? It was a different sensation then she had ever experience, she'd never had this feeling before; she therefore did not know it or how to describe it. It was a strong emotion, and it reminded her of regret, guilt, anger, and pain. But it all seemed to be directed in a loop, right back at Sunstar.

He hates... himself? She'd never heard of that before, and it was something she couldn't understand. She knew cats could hate other creatures, other cats, even a cat's own past mistakes she could understand hating. But hating yourself so entirely and deeply? It was beyond Scorch's young comprehension.

What could ave possibly made him feel like to himself? What happened that could cause this? She wasn't going to get the answers wondering, and she wouldn't get Sunstar's help without asking.

"Can we talk? Outside?" she made sure to add that since she still felt uneasy in the dark, patchy den. She was sure the shadows were playing games with her, constantly keeping her eyes flicking form one place to another.

"Of course, it is pretty dark in here. Not much warmer either," Sunstar mewed, though she heard the note of hesitation in his voice to agree to talk with her.

She hurried out in front of him, hoping to take the best of Sunstar's short-lived patience. "Is he coming?" Boulderpaw demanded, jumping in front of her as she reappeared from the shadowy den.

"Yes, move back quick, I didn't tell him you're hear yet," she murmured.

Too late! Sunstar stepped suddenly out of the shadows and stood with a guarded look down at the two young cats. "I see you didn't come alone, who is this?" Sunstar inquired in an expressionless tone, but Scorch sensed that he was worried and suspicious.

"This is-"

"I'm Boulderpaw, of ThunderClan," Boulderpaw introduced himself boldly, cutting off Scorch's calm introduction. Scorch felt the need to take a step back as the two toms faced each other, gaze's sparking, tension crackling. She sensed that an immediate dislike passed between them.

It wasn't that one was threatened by the other, but more as if their spirits were so different that they could hardly stand to be in the presence of the other. *They give me the same special feeling... Yet they are so very different.* She pondered the conundrum in her head for a moment, and then gave it to her heart to wonder over.

Finally she decided that they could stand there challenging each other silently all night so she stepped back up again. Taking a place by Boulderpaw, she silently announced who her first alliance was with and she felt a spark of irritation as Boulderpaw's glance flashed with momentary triumph over Sunstar.

"Anyways," she started in a hard tone, warning them to give up whatever petty grudge they had just formed for the time being. "Boulderpaw has been my friend and ally in my plans, so he *will* be involved in what we are going to do," she stated.

"*If* whatever these plans are get carried out, I have not agreed to do anything but hear you out," Sunstar reminded her gruffly, sitting down and looking at her, pointedly ignoring Boulderpaw who kept sending challenging glares at him.

"Sunstar, I'll begin with telling you that I already know that you are the former leader of RiverClan."

Sunstar gave a start, but quickly recovered, his wide orange stare draining of surprise in a heartbeat. "Did you? How did you figure that out?" he asked.

"It is so obvious, as I have a Clan apprentice sitting right beside me, that I won't go into details. However, this knowledge that you are rightful leader of RiverClan is the basis of my formulated plans," Scorch explained.

"I can't say I like where this going," Sunstar grumbled but made a gesture for her to continue.

"I do not know how much you know, but you should be aware that RiverClan and ShadowClan were both conquered under the control of Nightwing and are being terrorized as we speak," Scorch hesitated, to see how her words would affect Sunstar.

A glimmer of sadness and heavy guilt passed, but it was soon gone, so she continued. "Because Pinefur, who took over ThunderClan and WindClan, is the less aggressive of the two murderous leaders, I believe it is best to start with liberating the Clans of Nightwing first," her statement had Sunstar nodding in agreement, though Boulderpaw was clawing the frozen ground in anxious impatience.

"That does make sense... But, first tell me, do you know which RiverClan cats are alive? And how they are being treated?" Sunstar asked, a tone of desperate hunger in his words. His eyes showed he hoped to drink up whatever she had to say eagerly, whether it would whither or revive him.

Scorch shook her head slowly, "Nigthwing is very secretive, until recently I had never seen any cat but his black cats. We did, however, have brief conference with two RiverClan cats," Scorch explained.

"Well? Which two?" Sunstar hurried her on anxiously.

"Their names were Flickertail and Willowwater," Boulderpaw supplied when she hesitated. Scorch had hesitated because she recalled that both those cats had asked after her mother, just like Sunstar. That made three RiverClan cats that apparently knew her mother well enough to recognize something of her mother in her.

The troubled, uneasy feeling came back, she wanted to know what her mother had done so bad that it made her feel sick. But something in her wished to never know and just leave it for her mother to answer when she got back home. Home, now homesickness washed over her and she had to force herself to shake off the distant daydreams and turn back to the crucial reality she was in.

Sunstar seemed to be murmuring a prayer of thanks after hearing those two names and was now looking at her steadily. "Please, continue," he invited much more friendlily.

"We, as in Boulderpaw and I, plan on sneaking into ShadowClan territory and seeking out every able-bodied Clan cat willing to fight against Nightwing and set up plans for driving him out. However, we are worried that they won't follow the advice of two apprentices..." Scorch trailed off, leaving a clear opening for Sunstar to see what they were asking.

But he sat there stolidly, and she sensed fear rising in his belly that he was trying to replace with courage. "Sunstar, this is no easy request, but would you, for the sake of your Clan and all the Clans, help us save RiverClan and ShadowClan?" Scorch looked at Boulderpaw, his tone was sincere, and for a moment his feelings regarding Sunstar had been pushed down for his concern for the Clans, and not even his own Clan at that!

Sunstar now looked at Boulderpaw, a flicker of respect crossed their faces as their eyes met, even though the feeling of dislike lingered just as strong. Sunstar sighed and stood up, looking up at the cloud-woven night sky. *Toms really are strange.*

"I had sentenced myself to a life of exile and loneliness for my mistakes and cowardly escape, I don't think I can ever be the RiverClan leader again. However, if there is even a small chance that I can save my former Clan-mates, I am bound to give all my strength to them, even at the cost of my life."

Sunstar's words, though noble, sent a chill through Scorch. She had been planning a spectacular victory in full glory over the evil tyrants, but his words reminded her that there was no easy victory. Lives would be lost. Would she even be there at the end?

Even if I'm not, if the Clans succeed, that should be enough for me, right? But the thought was not comforting, she wanted to save the Clans, but she also wanted to find her parents just as much. *Then I'll just have to make sure I am there at the end*, she told herself stubbornly, overlooking the dangers she would be faced with.

"Right," she mewed, nodding at Sunstar thankfully. "This will be our counter-attack, and we shall succeed."

Chapter 22: First Begun, Half Done

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"That was an... interesting night," Boulderpaw commented as they neared the ThunderClan border and the midnight adventure hallowed to a close. Scorch gave a sidelong glance at Boulderpaw, they'd been silent most of the walk back, lost in their own thoughts and Scorch's thoughts had gradually turned to thoughts of sleep.

"I suppose it was," she agreed, thinking back to Sunstar and Boulderpaw's initial meeting. "You didn't seem to like him much," she commented, but it was almost an accusing tone since he had made the debate so much more difficult with his superficial dislike.

"Something about him just got on my bad side right away," Boulderpaw hissed through gritted teeth, quickening his pace and moving from her side to in front of her.

Scorch tried to ponder what had immediately gone screwy between the two, but her head was muddled with exhaustion and it was crowded with pictures of fluffy white clouds gilded with pink as the sunrise hurried the night out on a breath of sunlight.

"Why did you come all this way?" Boulderpaw's voice snapped out of her sky-gazing.

"Hmm?" she questioned dumbly, looking at him blankly, too tired to even pretend that she cared.

"Why did you travel with me all the way to the border? We passed your den a while back, right? I could have gone back the rest of the way on my own if you were really so exhausted," Boulderpaw mewed hurriedly, avoiding her gaze.

Scorch couldn't unravel his emotions that she was sensing so she

just yawned and responded to the question. "We're friends, right? Friends see each other home, to make sure they get there safe."

"Why? I can find my way by myself, and its not like you'd be much help in a fight," Boulderpaw pointed out.

"That's not the point though," Scorch sighed. *I'm really too tired for this right now*..."Friends like to stay together as long as they can, because as long as friends are around, we can keep going for as long as we need too. But as soon as we're alone, we feel exposed and lost, we doubt and we fear, so a little longer walk is worth the added peace," Scorch mewed, eyes sliding closed as she continued walking forward.

"Not that you can worry when you're asleep," Boulderpaw pointed out as she tripped over her own paws.

Scorch yawned again, "I'll take a little nap at the border before I go back," she mumbled.

"If you're sure..." Boulderpaw led her to the border. "Make sure you get back home quick, the longer you stay near her, the more danger you're in," he reminded her as she found a little hollow with overgrown ivy covering half of it in a protective red shield just before the border.

She laid down and mumbled a good night to Boulderpaw before falling asleep. Boulderpaw passed over the border and glanced back at his little friend. The red and black mottled kit was barely visible under neath the red ivy, and she blended in quite well; no one would notice her, she'd be fine.

But he hesitated. He was tired, but not as tired as she was since he had made sure to take a long nap before dusk, he was sure the silly kit hadn't thought that far ahead. He turned back to where Scorch was already soundly asleep. Grabbing her gently by the scruff, he carried her deeper into the woods, following vaguely the direction he knew her den was in.

I may be your friend, but you were my friend first. He'd never tell or admit it to any cat, but he'd turned so sour toward his Clan-mates

that they had avoided him and he had resorted to wandering the borders, searching for a fight to direct his emotions to or to end him.

That was what he'd been doing when Scorch had burst out of nowhere and saved the life he didn't want. But she had changed him, her stubborn optimism and ideal plan-forming mind that was both clever and left too much to fate. She was his friend because she had saved him even if he lost his life in her plans. *I want this life now, and I want to change things now. I know my destiny now, and I will fulfill it completely with Scorch's help.*

Now he had spotted another cat, and he pressed himself against a pine tree in the shadow as he watched suspiciously. The cat was a she-cat, cream colored with spots of white, black, and brown and green eyes that reminded him of the brightest moss in green-leaf. *Is that Painted? She looks like how Scorch described her...*

He'd never met or even seen any of Scorch's family, or friends, whichever they were. But how many cats could be in the right part of the woods with the exact description? Since the rising sun was edging over the horizon and pressing on his time-line, he took a chance.

"Hello?" he mewed, stepping out toward the she-cat. The cat turned her head and stiffened as she saw him and dashed for him so fast he hardly saw her in the deep gray of morning.

"What the heck did you do to Scorch?!" the cat snarled, wrenching Scorch from his grasp harshly. Boulderpaw gasped, watching to see if Scorch wouldn't wake- which she didn't- and then glared at the spotted she-cat who was glaring at him.

"You could have hurt her!" he spat.

"It wouldn't have been possible if you weren't always dragging her along on your dangerous schemes!" the she-cat growled.

Boulderpaw fell into a mutinous silence as they glared at each other. *How can a sweet cat like Scorch live with such an ill-tempered ruffian?!* But it wasn't just the cat's bad manners that got on his

nerve, it was the blistering fury in her eyes, she hated him for no reason outside of what he represented... Like Pinefur, like Nightwing, like all the rogues that had invaded his precious home.

The two cats stared at each other with growls in their throats, but neither saw the cat standing before them, they saw all their hatred and source of suffering represented by the face their eyes beheld.

Boulderpaw broke it off first and scoffed, "I don't have time for this," he growled turning.

"That's right! Leave! And don't even think of seeing Scorch again!" Painted yowled from behind him.

It sounded like a challenge in his ears so he looked over his shoulder loftily, "Oh, I'll see her again, she's *mine*," he swiped his tongue over his muzzle and hurried off. *I'll show that stupid she-cat someday, I'll flay her dirty pelt flat on the ground, and make her admit that Scorch is mine, not hers. She liked me more, no her.* But the meeting had driven from his mind the reason and feelings that had brought him to take care of Scorch in the first place, replaced by feelings of how he could prove that Scorch liked him more then that rangy she-cat and how he could prove himself to be the best of the two.

...

Scorch opened her eyes and yawned, preparing herself for the walk back to the den. But as she looked around at her surroundings, she wasn't covered by trailing red ivy, she was in the slightly better insulated den in her newly formed nest. *When did I?*

She was alone in the den with Mira and the slanted and red toned sunlight told her that it was already dusk. *Did I really sleep the whole day?* The ache of hunger in her belly told her the assumption was correct and she stood up, anxious to go hunt and catch something to fill her belly.

She padded quietly toward the entrance, having thought that Mira was sleeping, but the gray tabby opened one amber eye toward her. "Awake at last?" Mira purred gently.

"Yes, I didn't wake you, did I?" Scorch asked anxiously, eying the injured leg and judging by the scent that it didn't need to be replaced immediately, but would need to be changed tomorrow.

"No, but there isn't much for me to do aside from sleep and eat," Mira mewed, a tone of impatient frustration edging into her voice.

Scorch was sympathetic, but there needed to be at least three-quarters more of a moon of healing before they had her doing anything beyond gentle stretches. "Did you do your stretches today?" she asked.

"As always," Mira mewed, now a tone of despondence entered as she sighed. "But I won't keep you, I've heard your belly grumbling since sun-high; you go find something to eat." Scorch purred, that was why she loved Mira, even though the she-cat was in a difficult and annoying position, she still took care of others before herself.

Stepping out from the den, she was greeted by a chilly breeze that made the drafty den seem as warm as a mother's belly. Jump was lying in the weak sun and lifted his tail at her in greeting, but didn't speak. Scorch noticed the remains of a rabbit in front of him and guessed that he was too comfortable to make conversation.

Where's Painted? She couldn't really blame the she-cat today for not being around, since she'd been asleep since dawn, but it was working her last nerve that she couldn't seem to ever see her. *Okay, I'll stay up tonight to talk to her. But right now, I need some food!*

Letting Jump know she was going hunting, she bounded out through the rows of pines and pattered over the pine-needle floor, the brown needles were drying and becoming poky to the touch. But she didn't mind, they crackled under-paw with a fun noise and the rich aroma wafted up to her.

But then she slowed down and began seriously hunting as her first excitement of freedom ebbed. She soon heard the singing of a little sparrow and tracked it to a tree. She was worried the catch would require her to climb, but luckily there were other sparrows hopping around on the ground underneath the singing one.

For a moment she felt bad that she wouldn't be catching the sparrow that had given itself away, but instead would be ending the life of one of its friends. A sparrow would die because of its friend, wasn't that sad? Then she reminded herself this was prey and quickly caught the bird before gulping it down. The air was silent now, and she felt that the taste of the bird had put her into a melancholy mood.

The sun was half-way down the horizon, just visible underneath the boughs of the trees. It was large and red and shed the bloody light over the freezing world, not giving warmth, just light. It made her blood turn cold as the hallow light gleamed off her red fur, reflecting it brilliantly as if her fur were a moving mass of blood. It was a disturbing thought, but with the impending fights coming up, could soon become a reality.

She started wandering through the forest, worries of Painted gone, thoughts of Boulderpaw forgotten. All she could ponder as she drearily kept moving forward for the sake of movement was her chances of survival. She was almost six moons, she knew more about fighting than most kits her age, but she simply was not a match for trained killers three-times her size.

But how can I expect to change anything if I'm not going to put myself at risk? Its easy to talk and plan, its hard to put those words into action. And they won't follow me for long if I don't put myself in danger. Boulderpaw simply standing against Nightwing is enough to put him at risk, same with Sunstar. But I lose nothing by talking of rebellion, I can leave whenever things get dangerous. I don't have kin, or known friends, they have nothing to manipulate me with.

Shaking her head, she looked up to discover the sun had gone and the moon was out. Or rather, it may have not been with how the pine trees blocked it even more here than where she'd been the night before. *I should go back now... no, I should do something now!* Sleep was still far away and she was already at the Clan borders. She could at least try to do something to further their cause.

Heading toward ThunderClan's border, she hoped- but didn't expect -to find Boulderpaw. As expected, he wasn't there, and all Clan scent was fading on the border, telling her no cat had been there for

awhile so there was no use trying to see if he was nearby.

Unsure of what to do, she tentatively headed toward the ShadowClan border, supposing maybe she could find some tactility advantageous spots for assaults and fights. The dark night air was just as cold as the night before, but it seemed more dangerous without Boulderpaw by her side.

Plus, everything looks spookier alone! The hoot of an owl startled her and she jumped and ducked for cover as she recalled the brush with an owl last night. She looked up at the black covering, gaze flickering from one flitting shadow to the next one.

She crept out from underneath her covering, it was so dark she wasn't sure what it was, and continued toward the ShadowClan border. As she got closer the trees thinned slightly, letting in enough light for her to see her immediate surroundings.

The ShadowClan scent is stale, but the RiverClan is fresher. I'm surprised they've managed to keep their respective scents for so long. She crossed the border, unworried about being spotted as her darker pelt was invisible as she kept out of the small waving pools of moonlight.

She paused as a harsh breeze suddenly swept up and flung down a shower of pine needles around her. Her tail whipped around her and she paused to allow the wind to storm around her for a moment until it had relented and allowed her to move on.

She spied upward between the trees, no clouds were in sight, and there was no wet scent that promised precipitation, but a dry breeze to come like that suddenly was strange. It had just been a breath, a lone hacking cough from the sky and when it had passed it was gone, leaving a fresh layer of pine needles and her spirit stirred as more frequent, lighter breezes started flowing around her.

She picked up the pace, looking around and investigating every dip or shadow. She quickly found a few small hills and valleys where elevation could turn into their advantage should they use it closely. She also noticed one spot where the trees had lower branches than the surrounding pine trees, could they climb up quickly enough those could be useful.

Several other tactically advantageous spots were found by her but she knew that when -or more correctly, 'if,'- they got help from RiverClan and ShadowClan, there would be a much greater understanding of the territory from those cats and would probably render this adventure of her's useless. However, the wind had stirred her regenerated energy to a peak and had resulted in her scampering from one shadowy area to another in a dance with light and silver.

She squeaked as a flash of light almost touched her as a breeze overhead picked up and waved the branches. Thus the game continued as she dodged the suddenly appearing and disappearing shafts of light with twirls and hops.

"There it was again! I'm telling I heard something!" Scorch stopped dead and raised her head high as the mew flowed to her. Stiffened from excitement to fear she took a few steps backward until she was wholly enveloped in the darkest shadows of the area, grateful for the soft pine needles that muffled her steps.

She had kept her eyes firmly fixed in the direction the voice had come from, the wind having scattered the scents too thinly for her to identify any cat by scent. But the direction it came from was deeper in ShadowClan territory and the voice had been higher-pitched, suggesting a younger cat.

Though I have a doubt that an apprentice would be wandering out alone at night. She revoked the thought after recalling that she was hardly the age of an apprentice. She watched silently, carefully, wondering if the cat was coming this way or had changed direction.

She was about to turn back toward the border, guessing the cat was far enough off that she could slip away safely, until the soft murmuring picked up again, closer. "I haven't heard it in a while, we should go back Flashpaw, we are meant to be on the midnight patrol," a female voice, not the younger one which she assumed belonged to Flashpaw. This cat was older and held a note of authority, and she was unsure whether she should be glad that she didn't recognize it or worried.

"No! Now I've got the scent too!" Flashpaw carried on excitedly,

"Maybe its a rogue?!"

Now Scorch knew they were coming toward her, she could hear their paw-falls and steadily moving shadows from the direction of voices heralded them. Not to mention if they had her scent, it would be hard to hide in the shadows.

Hesitating on whether she should hide here, climb a tree, stay and talk to them, or run raced through her mind. However, as soon as she saw the tall black she-cat with claws unsheathed and fangs glinting in the moonlight, she was sure they weren't interested in talking and weren't going to let her get away with carelessness.

She ran.

Her soft paws made almost no sound on the soft pine needles, but as soon as she moved there was an immediate shout and the thundering of pursuing paws followed behind her. She had outrun cats before, but she had only outrun them in thick undergrowth - which she could slip through easier than larger cats- or they'd been injured.

Her short legs did little to give her a speed advantage in the flat, unobstructed territory. The two cats -she could sense- were getting excited as they closed in on her, one on each side so that she couldn't veer away and lose them.

The cold air whistled around her as she cut through it, her breath coming in desperate pants, sprinting this long in such cold air was giving her an increased urge to cough. Her desperation was only increased when she realized the other two cats were just barely pushing themselves. Now, this was impressive for a six moon old cat to be able to keep up with such larger cats, but not impressive enough.

Scorch allowed herself to collapse as soon as the younger attacker's claws grazed her shoulder to avoid more damage. They tumbled and skidded in a tangle of legs and tails on the slippery pine needles. Scorch obviously couldn't see as well as her attacker as black paws seemed to form out of the shadows themselves and dissipate before she could retaliate.

She felt absolutely helpless as scratch after scratch fell, her attacker giggling at her slow attempts of retaliation. She shivered with fear, but accepted anyways, as one of her mirages appeared beside her, seemingly in another fight from long ago.

Unused to her mirages being helpful, she copied the mirage's moves, eyes widening in shock as she found that it worked. This mirage of hers, probably in such a similar circumstance, had the technique of dodging and then attacking opposite of where the attack had come from working so well that her attacks were landing more and the blows she received were lessening.

Fear subsiding, the mirage faded, only vaguely outlined until it fled and disappeared from sight. Scorch attempted to imitate it before her opponent caught rhythm of her attacks. But it seemed that what she had that her mirage hadn't had was a second opponent.

As Scorch tried to jump away from the fight and initiate a tactical retreat, the other cat that she'd lost sight of pounced on her. This much larger cat practically squashed her with just the two front paws. The air was knocked from her legs as she was pounded to the earth and her she had to close her eyes to keep the world from spinning as she gave wheezy pants, struggling to get air to her flattened body.

"Its just a kit!" the older she-cat on top of her exclaimed.

"I noticed it was small, but I didn't think it was a kit!" the younger she-cat that had served as her opponent gasped.

"Is it a Clan kit?" the voice above her pondered.

"Stop smushing it and maybe it can tell us!" the younger cat chided the older one.

The weight on top of Scorch lifted and she gave an immediate breath of relief, coughing a little as she chocked in air and stumbled to her paws. "Kit, the heck are you doing in NightClan territory?" the larger black cat demanded, her two enemies had sat down on opposite sides of her, ensuring her stay and cooperation.

"NightClan?" Scorch echoed, staring up at the older black she-cat which she saw had faint dark gray stripes on her black fur that shone silver in the moonlight. She also had green eyes that gleamed brilliantly and made Scorch feel as if she was no longer facing shadow-cats but actual breathing creatures.

"I thought this was ShadowClan territory," Scorch mewed. *Since when was there a NightClan?* The older she-cat's whiskers twitched in amusement, but her eyes glistened with melancholy sadness.

"This used to be ShadowClan territory," the cat sighed, "But now its NightClan."

"Yeah, and I used to be RiverClan," the younger cat behind her piped up. Scorch turned and looked at the she-cat that sat about two-and-a-half mouse-lengths taller than her. The cat, probably an apprentice based on name and size, was black furred as well, but her fur shimmered like starlight and had a depth of softness to it that reminded Scorch or her recently shed kit-fur. She also had bright gray eyes that looked like gleaming silver.

"So is NightClan the name of the combined ShadowClan and RiverClan?" Scorch guessed, seeing that there was a former ShadowClan and RiverClan cat sitting around her.

"Yes," the older cat inclined her head, "But... how does a wandering kit know that? Are you from ThunderClan?" Scorch searched the tone for loftiness or disgust as Boulderpaw often used when talking of cats from different Clans, but these cats seemed genuinely concerned for her, or at least curious. It gave her a warm, promising feeling.

"No, I'm not from ThunderClan," she answered the question honestly, looking up steadily at the she-cat. "But I do have friends in ThunderClan, so I know all about the Clans. My name is Scorch and right now I live in the woods beyond the border," she gave a short explanation.

"Scorch, huh..." the RiverClan apprentice mumbled something and gave her a suspicious look. But there wasn't anger or malice in it, something she had said had sparked a memory in the apprentice;

Scorch sensed it. But there was no change in the older cat, confusing her.

"My name is Shadowripple, former proud ShadowClan cat. And that is Flashpaw, former RiverClan apprentice, and now my apprentice. She's not too bad, for a RiverClan cat," Shadowripple teased, green eyes glowing with quiet approval as she looked at the young black she-cat, but a wistful longing was present in her as well.

She wants her own Clan back, and as much as she seems to have grown to like the RiverClan apprentice, she wants both a ShadowClan apprentice and Flashpaw to be back home with her own Clan-mates. However, based on what she'd heard from Boulderpaw, Scorch was very much impressed by how the two Clans had merged under such dark circumstances.

This may be to my advantage if I don't have to deal with convincing the cats to work together to free themselves, Boulderpaw was really worrying me about that.

"Well, Scorch, what are you doing in NightClan territory, not that I mind, but we will have to escort you out," Shadowripple mewed.

Part of Scorch wanted to ask why Shadowripple didn't mind her being there if they had been so excited about chasing her out not long before. But there was a more pressing thing to say. "Shadowripple, Flashpaw, I came here tonight with a secret and imperative mission..."

Explaining the plan took time, and dealing with their excitement and despair was difficult, but all Scorch could think was, *the start is the hardest, once it is started -once it gets going- then all I'll have to do is sit back and watch it roll.*

Chapter 23: Hearts Of Gold

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"You what?!" Sunstar and Boulderpaw stared at her open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

She flicked her tail impatiently to cover the nervousness their shock had caused her. "I set up a meeting between us and all the cats that Shadowripple and Flashpaw know to be loyal to their Clans," Scorch repeated.

"What- but- how?" Boulderpaw demanded.

"I ran into them two nights ago, we talked- I told them of our plan- they said they'd consider it- yesterday they told me they'd help me- and then we set up this meeting for two days from now," Scorch explained.

Boulderpaw and Sunstar shared a glance and then looked at her. Boulderpaw scowled but Sunstar grinned, "Aren't you just a little go-getter?" the leader laughed, ruffling her head with a paw. Scorch purred at his praise, but then grew silent with her eyes cast down... her father would always ruffle her head when he praised her.

"But how will we know they're not lying and won't set a trap for us? To get on the good side of Nightwing?" Boulderpaw continued, frowning in thought.

"They weren't lying," Scorch smiled softly and reassuringly. Boulderpaw knew that she could sense the true core emotions of a cat.

"What if they changed their minds?" the gray tom pressed.

"Well, we'll just have to trust them. If we don't trust the cats we're trying to help, I assure you we won't get far," Scorch answered him.

Boulderpaw grunted, "True enough," he sighed and gave her the

victory of the argument.

"Plus, it was a good mix to have both a ShadowClan and RiverClan cat find the ones they are certain won't betray us," Sunstar mused. "They know their Clan-mates better and the other cats won't be as willing to get their own Clan-mate in trouble as they might be for a cat from a rival Clan. Even if they don't go along with us, we could probably count on them to keep their mouths shut," the leader was staring up at the blue sky and golden sun thoughtfully.

"Right, this is probably the best chance we'll get for making our plan known to them and including them in on the plan," Scorch was encouraging Boulderpaw since he still looked reluctant.

"Yeah," he sighed, looking away.

Scorch sighed as well, but she stood up. "Its almost dusk, I'll be in trouble if I stay out past dark again," she mewed. "Lets meet where the ShadowClan, ThunderClan, and rogue border meet at dawn, two days from now. The meeting with the NightClan cats will be there sometime that day. They didn't say when, except that they'd wait until Nightwing went on his daily border patrol on the RiverClan-WindClan border," Scorch gave the final details and then left toward her den.

She had gone a few meters when hurried paw-steps sounded behind her. She turned and looked up to see Boulderpaw behind her. "Scorch? Are you sure about this? Its going to get dangerous in the Clans if your plan goes correctly. You've done enough for cats you owe nothing to, perhaps you should step out after this meeting," Boulderpaw mewed, his blue eyes only showed concern but she sensed that he didn't really want her to leave; that he was only doing this in an act of generosity.

She was unsure whether to be touched that he would even try to put her first, or annoyed by his insincerity. *Considering what he's lived through... I don't really mind*. So she gave him a light smile and shook her head, "No, I'll see this through. What would I do without this anyways? Stay at the den and laze around all day? Not tempting in the slightest," she laughed and continued off with a final goodbye for Boulderpaw.

What she said was true, she was far too restless to laze around all day. But fighting in deadly battles for the fate of a whole society of cats was not her ideal alternative. She sighed and dropped her head as she walked over the fallen brown-red pine-needles, sometimes she wished that she could just play with Boulderpaw all day. That her stolen moments with him were not all wrapped up in this impending war.

But it is, and it won't change. I *tried to ignore it, but now Leafpaw is dead. I can't do that again, I can't wait until I find that Boulderpaw winds up dead.* Her heart thudded harshly as she put the fear into her thoughts. She knew that was what had been scaring her since she'd learned the news of Leafpaw, and that had made her plans that much more important to her.

She paused and looked up at the sky through the broken patches of pine needles. It was a deep blue, just beginning to take on a pinkish hue as the sun started descending, glowing red through the trees. The air wasn't as cold as it had been previously, the two sunny days in a row had warmed the air to a tolerable cold. Although, the wind was still chilly enough to make a cat's ears go numb.

But right now, the wind had died away and the color of the world was brown and gold and red. The dark brown ground covered with gold-brown pine needles with patches of withering golden sunlight. The murky trunks of the pine trees gleamed red as dusk descended and the pine-trees were a hazy edging that registered as a dark sky, trapping her in the world of flashing sunlight and blinding colors.

It was a world where she blended in, her fur sank into the scenery. She almost expected an oppressed feeling to ensue, but it was actually calming. Just being one with the world, not being noticed, but just moving along as an invisible inhabitant.

But now the light was taking on a red hue, glinting everything with a crimson tone. Scorch ignored the worries it brought up and continued back to the den. She entered the clearing and made her way toward the den. No cat had been in sight and when she entered the den, she saw Mira and Jump chatting quietly.

They looked happy, carefree as they enjoyed each others company.

It would be nice, wouldn't it? If I could spend time with my friends and not worry. She headed to her nest and sat down, curling down comfortably and cleaning her fur, having time for that once.

She'd eaten before meeting up with Sunstar and Boulderpaw, so she would be fine until morning. She'd gotten up before dawn and even though it wasn't quite dark, she felt it was late enough to go to sleep. So she did, with the murmurs of lovers in her ears and the feeling of desolation in her chest.

...

"Have you seen Painted? I really need to talk to her," the sky was clear and cold as Scorch talked to Jump the next morning. After catching and eating her breakfast, she'd decided that she really needed to talk to Painted finally. Before she left to the meeting.

The white tom shook his head and shrugged, "She's been quiet for a while now; since you came back. In any case, she didn't tell me when she would get back or where she was going," he answered.

"Did you see her leave?"

"Yes... it was just before you came out," Jump answered.

Scorch flicked her tail irritably, it really seemed as if Painted was avoiding her! "I'm going to try to see if I can find her. If she comes back, please make sure she doesn't leave," Scorch asked and Jump mewed in agreement.

She then set out, Scorch didn't know Painted extremely well- Mira probably knew her habits far better -but she could guess that Painted would search out a quiet, isolated place for peace. But she grumbled as she realized she knew the trails to water sources where herbs used to grow and the Clan borders far better than the nice, quiet spots in the surrounding woods.

Even though I've lived here for two moons! She paused for a moment as she recallled a half-moon clearing with juniper bushes and a twig-thin stream. *That was a peaceful place... and it wasn't too close to Clan borders*. She turned toward the clearing that she'd accidentally

stumbled upon one warm day that quickly turned cold.

Pushing thoughts of that day out of her mind, she hurried her pace until she only had time to concentrate on dodging obstacles in her path. She slowed, catching her breath as she neared and sniffed the air, pausing in a weak pool of sunlight to stretch.

She thought she could smell Painted, but the cold always made her nose more sensitive so it hurt to draw in scents and that alone subsequently made it harder. But she saw Painted as she padded up the small rise. Painted was turned toward her, eyes closed, chest heaving in deep breaths, but her features were calm. She may as well have been sleeping.

Scorch moved as quietly as she could, sensing that Painted's spirit felt stirred, her mind concentrated in another place and another time. Scorch sat down next to Painted, feeling the warmth seep out of the earth and into her. What about this place seemed so warm?

She wasn't sure if she'd be happy with knowing, but she grasped desperately at the nostalgic sensation the clearing held and looked around. It was the first time she'd wished to see a mirage since back in the ThunderClan clearing; however this seemed much happier.

The colors were drained, but the movements the mirage cats made were considerably more fluent than when she'd first seen her mirages- like broken images put together they'd been. But now it was as if she was watching the scene from the very time it had occurred.

In the clearing, a den was constructed into the Juniper semi-circle and two young kits played around the stream, splashing their tiny paws and splashing each other with echoing shrieks of delight as the height of green-leaf boasted its richness around them. A dark brown tabby tom was padding into the clearing, prey hanging from his jaws and amber eyes glowing with peaceful contentment as he watched over his family.

Then a cat raised its head, she hadn't noticed it prior since its light pelt blended in well with the faded background. Only one color shone through the scene, this cat's brilliantly green eyes. Scorch

realized she felt neither surprise nor sadness when she recognized the eyes as Painted's.

But they were not the eyes or her Painted. Her Painted's eyes were distant, realistic, firm, stubborn, constantly pushing through life and the heartache it brought. But this Painted's eyes were bright, cherry, drinking in the warmth and youth of her kits and her mate; her joy was complete and not shattered like that of her Painted.

Scorch gave a soft smile at the ground as she allowed the mirage to change. She was searching out the one trail of cold horror she knew must linger here no matter how faintly. *There*, a chill terror lingered like a lone dark cloud on an otherwise beautiful day.

She looked again as the mirage unfolded like a sad story. The light was dimmer, suggesting that it had occurred at night. The cats were just darker shadows against the gray scenery. Painted's mate was out facing the three Clan warriors that were there while Painted stood in front of the two kits, her eyes were void of all emotion; nothing but foggy confusion and a single question, *why?*

It was a look she'd seen in Boulderpaw several times before, and when she heard of Leafpaw's death, she knew it had been in hers. Painted's mate was being beaten back and that was when Painted started nudging her kits out of the clearing, in the opposite direction of Clan territory.

Her mate scrambled after them, limping badly and leaving a trail of blood that even she could see in the drained visage. But then they both grabbed a kit and sprinted, weariness forgotten in the fear of the moment. Then they were gone and the mirage dispersed as the Clan warriors yowled in triumph.

It hadn't been a huge event, the fight hadn't been long, but it had changed the course of four lives drastically. Scorch looked up at Painted, she still couldn't understand her hatred of the Clans. It wasn't as if they had been malicious, in fact, the sense she had gotten was that they believed that what they were doing was just. And they hadn't killed her mate even though they could have easily done so with him at their mercy.

But Painted didn't know of her power, the cream she-cat would never know that she knew how it had happened. *Although I imagine it felt much scarier than it looked*. "Can we talk?" Scorch broke the silence with a gentle sigh.

"I was wondering what you wanted," Painted mewed in what was almost a grumble.

"We haven't talked for ages, we used to get along," Scorch mewed.

"We've only known each other for maybe three moons now, I don't know what kind of relationship one can really create in that time."

"Its the same amount of time I had with my parents, and I had a strong relationship with them," Scorch mewed softly, trying her hardest not to let the sadness get to her now.

"They were your parents, it was natural," Painted sighed, lifting her nose to the sky.

"Its also natural for one to grow close to friends when they need them most, whether they want to or not.."

Painted didn't respond as Scorch continued watching the tall she-cat. "I wanted to talk to you about the Clans," Scorch finally sighed, beating around the bush wouldn't get her anywhere with Painted.

"You already know how I feel about them, and how I feel about your contact with them," the spotted she-cat's voice turned hard and frosty.

Scorch shook her head softly, "I know how you feel, but you don't know how they feel. I'm leaving tomorrow morning to help them free themselves, I won't stop or be coming back until they're either free or I'm dead."

She expected an outburst of emotion from Painted, or furious apathy, but the she-cat just looked at her tiredly. "I had a feeling you'd decide to do something like that. I'm sorry, but I can't take it. Before you leave, tell Jump how to look after Mira's leg and we will leave when she is healed. I'm sure Mira will miss you, but I can't

handle living in this place while you're off liberating the Clans," Painted mewed, eyes focused on the blue sky; no regret evident.

Scorch dipped her head, she'd already resigned herself to leaving on bad terms with Painted, indifferent terms weren't ideal either but it was better than bitterness. "I'll miss you guys, I really did appreciate all you did for me. Leaving your home and putting yourselves in danger..." emotion choked her and she looked down.

But no tears came, her eyes were dry as she faced the fact that she was going to be leaving the cats that cared for her more than any-cat else right now in exchange for cats that would most likely not like her for superficial reasons and might even kill her. It was definitely a give more then you get kind of moment.

"I have to go tell Mira and Jump," Scorch mumbled her excuse as she stood up.

"I won't be coming back to the den tonight," Painted mewed as she walked away.

Scorch knew what that meant and she pushed the hurt from her gaze as she continued walking. "Goodbye, Painted. I'll see you again, maybe in the stars."

Painted turned her head and watched the small kit walk away quietly, tail trailing on the dry grass but ears up to the wind. "Stupid kit, going to kill herself helping cats that's caused her nothing but problems. Wouldn't bother wondering why, I'll never understand her... But she sure does have a heart made of the finest gold."

...

"Do you really have to go?" Mira's soft voice made her heart feel guilty as she got ready to leave in the black mists of morning.

"Yes," she answered, she still couldn't regret her decision, but it was a saddening experience anyways.

Last night she had told Jump and Mira she was leaving. Jump hadn't seemed surprised, but Mira had been deeply troubled by it

and they'd had their tearful goodbye then. Scorch had heard her sniffling all night long. But she had told Jump how to use the herbs and where to find them, they'd be just fine.

Now all that was left was to leave and go away. *Its not a huge deal, life will go on for all of us and we'll survive just fine*. "Will we ever see each other again?" Mira sighed, her voice was dismal.

"Of course!" Scorch answered jubilantly, keeping her face turned toward the entrance so that Mira couldn't see the doubt in her eyes. "When I'm finished here and go looking for my parents again, I'll first go stop by your den and see you all again!"

Mira purred and even Jump chuckled. "Well then, goodbye for now," Jump mewed as she stepped out of the den. "And best of luck," Mira murmured. This was it, step forward once, and again, and again, and she was gone.

The cold, dark air did little to lift her spirits as Scorch padded through it. She'd caught extra prey last night and had eaten in the den, so she was all set. But her belly twisted with a sickening feeling as fear and anxiety took over her and she felt as if her legs were trembling.

What was she doing? She was leaving friends for enemies. Where was she going? No cat knew. Why was she doing this? Because of one friend. I must be insane, she thought. But as she turned her thoughts to Boulderpaw her fears calmed and the sickening anxiety turned to fluttering nervousness.

I'm going to help Boulderpaw! And my father's Clan; in a way they're my family too. Maybe I don't owe the Clans anything, but they certainly don't owe me anything either. I can't leave them the way they are, I know that, and that is why I'm doing this. It is an adventure after-all.

Now the light was starting to brighten and the tails of the mist started hiding from her more as the deep gray turned silvery. The frost clung to the grass and the fog clung to the pine trees, entangling themselves. It was a gray morning with an overcast sky and a ghostly world. Hardly the best omen.

She paused as she got to the meeting spot, the mingling smell of ThunderClan, ShadowClan, RiverClan, and forest smells confused her senses. Feeling slightly wary with the loss of her sense of smell, she turned to an old, blackened cinder tree and scrambled up it, carefully crouching on the creaking old branches.

The fog seemed to thicken as dawn approached, a dampness clamped onto her fur and she shivered under the suffocating stillness. She pricked her ears as she heard movement, it was a lone paw step but it echoed in the dense fog.

Looking down over the black branch she was crouched on, she saw a flash of gold. For a heartbeat she wondered if the sun was shining through, but then she saw ears and a figure took form out of the glittering fog. It was Sunstar.

She gave a mew of greeting as Sunstar looked around and scooted down the tree carefully but quickly. "Scorch, good to see you're here. Is Boulderpaw here yet?"" the former leader asked. His tone was calm and composed as usual, but their was an edge to it. He was nervous for what was to come.

"No, but we're early. Besides, he has to sneak away from his Clan-mates," Scorch reminded him.

"Of course, of course," muttered Sunstar uncomfortably as Scorch sat down on the frozen needle-covered ground. The leader paced around while Scorch watched through squinted eyes; trying her best to keep her nerves from resurfacing.

She pricked her ears first as she heard the rapid paw-steps coming from the direction of the ThunderClan-ShadowClan border. "I believe that is him," Scorch murmured.

"Yeah," Sunstar agreed, stopping his pacing and looking toward the direction they were coming from.

But Scorch stiffened. Something... wasn't right. It was the paw-steps, they were too heavy, too frequent; the sense of danger enveloped her "Hide," she whispered to Sunstar, scrambling up the cinder again and pressing herself against the shadow, hoping the black in

her fur would cover her enough in the shadow that the red wouldn't show through too well.

Sunstar had hidden beneath a brown-gold bush. But Scorch knew that if any-cat was really searching for them, they couldn't miss spotting them. *Why do our pelts stand out so much in the fog? Boulderpaw would blend right in!* But the pounding was growing louder into a melodious roar.

There was a streak of fur and tails and they were gone. Scorch stayed still for a moment longer, unsure of what had just happened. *Four black cats, from NightClan? But what are they doing out here and going into rogue territory?*

The question wasn't what was sending shivers down her spine though. One of those cats, the leader of the group, it had been a black tom with amber eyes and brown paws. The look in his eyes had frozen her cold and she still felt as if she was covered in ice.

"You okay, Scorch?" Sunstar called gently from where he was untangling himself from the bush.

"Yes..." Scorch climbed down and looked where she knew Boulderpaw was approaching.

"Are you guys okay? I saw the ShadowClan cats and hung back," Boulderpaw mewed as he appeared form the fog.

"You probably could have followed on their tails and they wouldn't have noticed," Scorch joked, looking at how his gray fur blended in so well with the fog; she swore she could see wisps of fog pulling our of his fur.

"Well, we're all here. What now?" Sunstar asked.

Before Scorch could answer she was interrupted by a call. "Scorch? Are you here yet?" She recognized Shadowripple's voice cutting through the fog.

"They're here already?" Scorch wondered out loud before replying to the ShadowClan cat. "Yes!"

The black tabby she-cat appeared like a black myriad out of the misty-fog, her fur seemed to suck in the surrounding light, causing the fog to seem darker. But her bright green eyes cut through the gray abyss like a clover in a mud puddle.

"You're here already!" Shadowripple trilled, then it fell away as her eyes landed on Sunstar. The light drained and her eyes went blank in shock. Scorch realized she hadn't named her companions in the night encounter with her.

"Are you alright, Shadowripple?" she asked tentatively.

"What? Yes, of course. I just never thought I'd see a real Clan leader again," Shadowripple ducked her head in embarrassment and a wary emotion Scorch didn't recognize. She looked at Sunstar and saw he looked strained, a sensation went though her that made her chest go tight and her tail flick quickly.

"Are we meeting now?" Scorch asked, turning to Shadowripple and pushing past the tense atmosphere.

"Yes, Nightwing was going out to scout more territory out this way, so he won't be back until at least sun-high. But we decided that we'll meet by the lake so that he won't come across us, or our scents, on his way back," Shadowripple explained, leading them quickly into ShadowClan, or NightClan, territory.

"What about his other cats that he left behind?" Boulderpaw huffed as they walked briskly, sticking to her side while Sunstar brought up the rear.

"I don't think we'll have to worry about them, they hardly ever leave camp unless its to go patrolling with Nightwing or do training near the camp. Besides, some of them are coming to the meeting," the black she-cat added quietly.

"What?!" Boulderpaw snarled, sounding outraged while Scorch looked at him oddly.

"Something wrong?" she asked Boulderpaw and Sunstar who were both glaring at Shadowripple who padded on steadily, ignoring the

piercing glares aimed at the back of her head.

"They're obviously going to be there just to tell Nightwing about our plans and have us killed!" Boulderpaw growled at her with the look that said, 'you are an idiot.'

But Scorch didn't see it that way. "You trust these cats that you invited, right?" Scorch waited for Shadowripple's nod before she continued. "So, we should give them a little trust. Just because they were reeled in by Nightwing's talk before, doesn't mean they agree with his rule now."

"But their loyalty is to him!" Boulderpaw argued. Sunstar had stayed silent, but his dark look and nod showed that he agreed with Boulderpaw.

"You Clan-cats have such odd ideas about loyalty," Scorch sighed, shaking her head. "A Cat's feelings change and their loyalty can change too, very quickly actually. A desire, a mission, it can change overnight just as easily as over a long period of time. If Shadowripple and Flashpaw trusted them enough to believe that they'll help us, than we will trust them too. These are their Clans," Scorch reminded them.

"RiverClan is my Clan," Sunstar growled unhappily.

"No, RiverClan is their Clan, the cats that stayed through it all this while," Scorch gave him a rough reminder. "You are not their leader again and they are not your Clan, until they accept you back," Scorch told him.

"Okay, okay," Sunstar sighed in defeat. But Scorch wondered if she'd been to harsh on him.

"We're almost there," Shadowripple mewed, pausing as the tree line ended. Scorch padded to her side to look out and her mouth curved up in a smile as she looked out over the lake. It was cloaked in fog, but the water glimmered like dewdrops anyway, its gray silkiness made her just want to run her paw over the moving mass and feel the powerful sensation flow through her. The way the ocean would back at home.

"They're down a little that way," Shadowripple mewed, nodded down to the south rim. Scorch could just barely catch the scent of other cats in the still air and a few flitting shadows were the only thing that promised life.

"Lets go," Scorch took a deep breath and followed Shadowripple the rest of the way.

A group of cats awaited them, there were black cats and non-black cats; there were RiverClan, ShadowClan, and NightClan cats -as she'd decided to call Nightwing's cats-; they all watched them with the same distrusting, wary look. The atmosphere was less then comforting and spotting Willowwater and Flickertail in the crowd didn't ease Scorch's anxiety.

Until she realized they weren't looking at her at all, nor were they looking at Boulderpaw, all eyes were trained on Sunstar. The leader stared stoically in front of him, not meeting any gaze or even showing any discomfort. He was different now, on the outside at least, quiet confidence showed through every muscle even though more then one cat looked hatefully discontent at his presence.

"Sunstar, why are you here?" a golden she-cat growled, coming forward. Her green eyes flashed with contesting emotions of joy and relief between anger and betrayal.

"Sweetberry, I am here because I can't make my mistakes right by staying away," Sunstar answered.

Scorch backed away as more cats crowded around Sunstar, being pressed against Boulderpaw as they allowed Sunstar to handle the initial talks. "See, this is why it was imperative we had him help us," Scorch whispered smugly to Boulderpaw.

"He hasn't won them over yet," Boulderpaw grumbled back at her.

"Shh, listen." She hushed him, turning her attention back to Sunstar as the greetings and incoherent remarks died down to real debating.

The first questions were mostly asking why Sunstar was there and why now, which he answered simply much like his first answer to

Sweetberry. Then came the more delicate questions on how Sunstar was going to help them and what they were required to do.

"There is only one thing we can do. We have to fight. Fight for freedom, fight for justice, and fight for our lives," Sunstar's call was growing stronger as he urged them. "We all know negotiating won't work with Nightwing, he wants his way and only his way, to win back our Clans, our heritage, we must defeat him once and for all!"

A murmur of agreement came from the crowd, growing to a a few yowls of approval. "We will fight, and we will win! StarClan is on our side, and so is the warrior-code, we can't lose!"

Scorch flinched against Boulderpaw as he said that. *Mistake*.

She wasn't the only one who noticed it. Willowwater was the first to call him out on it, her green eyes were blazing with the fire of self-righteous hurt. "But we did lose! We were beaten and we had everything taken from us! Our lives, our dreams, even our friends! Why should we go through that again? At least right now we don't have to worry about dying for no reason!"

Sunstar was taken aback at the fury in her voice and tried to collect his thoughts. Scorch stepped to his side. "That's not completely true," she murmured softly. "You all suffer everyday, right? That's why you came here, in the hope that you could get an escape. But you wished for a reset solution, you wanted everything to go back to how it was instantly. But that can't happen, the only way to have happiness and peace is to risk everything we have on this one hope of a better day in the future. We must fight, and we must be willing to let go of our present security for it."

Her gentle words quieted down the murmuring resentment and she saw a few curious glances flashed at her, wondering who she was. But she was looking up at Willowwater, their gazes locked and she could see, she *knew*, Willowwater was thinking of her mother, and it was saddening the she-cat while at the same time giving her strength.

With all the cats making peace with their misgivings of starting a war, this was the time to once again call them to fight. "We will all

rise up as one and end Nightwing's reign! And we will do it now, no more waiting, only action! There will be no losing this time because we will not let it end until we are victorious!" Her voice rose above, strong and sonorous.

This time the response was complete and strong, yowls of support and battle cries rang in her ears. Scorch grinned, seeing Sunstar's nod of approval and Boulderpaw's coveted look of admiration. But as she looked across the ragged group of cats she didn't know that shivered in the morning fog; all she saw were hearts full of new-found courage and hunger for victory. It was golden.

Chapter 24: Forward Go

Chapter 24: Forward Go

The yowls of the beginning attack were around her as Scorch set down to the important task of planning. She turned toward Shadowripple who's green eyes glowed with excitement and pride. "Shadowripple, do you think Nightwing would come back the same way he left?" she murmured her question to not disturb the excitement.

Shadowripple stared at her and blinked a few times, "Yes, that's the shortest route."

"What was he scouting for?" Scorch asked, running scenarios through her head and possible outcomes from possible actions.

"He was scouting both to expand the border on the rouge side and into ThunderClan territory. Nightwing and Pinefur have been daring each other to make the first move on each other for moons now. Nightwing's finally confident enough to try an attack," Shadowripple growled.

Scorch nodded, she'd already known that from Boulderpaw, but the knowledge that Nightwing was planning an attack made it necessary for them to move quick or else Pinefur would catch wind of what was going on in NightClan.

"If cats left now, could we intercept Nightwing before he got back to camp?" she asked.

Shadowripple looked confused, but nodded. "But we can't attack now!" she exclaimed. Her outburst brought other cat's attention to them.

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

"We need to train and prepare!" Shadowripple sounded exasperated.

"Are you saying you aren't already trained and prepared for anything? Warriors are supposed to be. Besides, I assure you this won't stay a secret from Nightwing for much longer than a few days or so. Now that we've started, we have to continue forward with it or everything will far apart," Scorch tried to explain, though she actually felt that Nigthwing would know what was going on before dusk.

She could sense it, one of these cats was spying for Nightwing. She raised her head and met the green eyes of a black tom. "Who is that?" she asked, nodding at him.

Shadowripple glanced at him, "His name is Crowpelt, he used to be WindClan but he ditched them for Nightwing. I didn't want to invite him but Shadebreeze asked me to give him a chance," Shadowripple murmured.

"I want him to stay here while a party of six goes and intercepts Nightwing. Six fast cats, they need to leave now," Scorch announced.

A murmur of surprise rippled through the cats, but Sunstar quickly quieted them. "We must act now, no more hesitating. I need five cats to come with me," he urged.

Scorch flicked her tail, she would have preferred six cats that already knew the territory well, but Sunstar was the only leader figure as of yet and she couldn't argue with him right now. "I'll go," she mewed. No cat heard her and Boulderpaw quickly stuffed his tail in her mouth.

"No, you won't. You couldn't keep up and you can't fight," he growled.

"Yes, I could!" Scorch protested.

"No, you couldn't. As far as every other cat is concerned at least. And I'm fairly sure you wouldn't be much of a match for Nightwing. The gap between your wit and his strength is too great. You can't outwit sch a physical disadvantage no matter how smart you are," Boulderpaw muttered in her ear.

Scorch admitted he was right, not saying that she could have possibly beaten one of Nightwing's cats or teamed-up with another cat. But Sunstar had his five cats and she stepped up, looking at a ShadowClan tom; he was older but still strong looking with a silver-blue coat and solid gray eyes.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Silverwing," he responded, she liked how he didn't look down at her with patronizing amusement but seemed to judge her based on her manner and she trusted him immediately.

"I want you to be in charge of taking the patrol to the right place and in getting them back here again. We'll have set up a camp around here somewhere by the time you are back. Be careful and don't allow cats to take stupid risks. This is a surprise attack and meant to distract them, so once they run off, leave them be and come back as fast as you can," she ordered.

The cats on the patrol seemed to recognize the wisdom in her plan and nodded before setting out at an incredibly fleet pace. She turned to the remaining cats. Without Sunstar to command them, they seemed a little lost at what to do.

Scorch chewed her lip. She could command them- she knew what they needed to do -but she had a feeling only a few would listen to her. *I need a strong cat that's willing to help me and is popular and respected.* She looked around and her eyes were drawn to a red-brown tom with cream dappled spots and amber eyes. The most memorable thing about him was how his tail kept flicking.

"Flickertail!" she dodged cats to get to his side.

He looked down at the sound of her voice, amber eyes troubled but he gave her his full attention. "Yes, Scorch?"

"I need your help, get a few cats and find a spot for a temporary camp that's both easily defended and evacuated. Then we need to find out if there are cats back in Nightwing's camp that need to come; it'll be easier if its done before they hear about the rebellion," Scorch mewed quickly.

"There's no cat inside the camp left. But the non-black cats slept outside of camp. Not all of them came and they do need to be told," Flickertail murmured.

"Three cats need to go then, the rest need to stay here though. Also-" she broke off and eyed Crowpelt again.
-He needs to stay here," she mewed, nodding at the black tom.

Flickertail followed her gaze, "No cat likes him much though... why not just let him go whining to Nightwing?"

"Because, its better if we keep our enemies split up. They're stronger and more of a threat in a group, even if its only by one cat. Besides, he's heard too much," Scorch mewed.

"Why don't we just raid the camp now then? Capture as many as we can and than getting rid of Nightwing will be easy," Flickertail suggested.

Scorch had already considered that. "No, only three other cats went with Nightwing, they still outnumber us. Not to mention..." she trailed off awkwardly, acutely aware of how malnourished every cat was, except for the black cats that looked healthy as could be. "They have the edge on individual strength right now. We have to give it a little time," Scorch mewed.

"But then-"

"Right now, we need a camp. Then strategize," Scorch reminded him. Flickertail opened his mouth but quickly closed it again, calling a few cats to himself.

Now Scorch sighed, with things moving on now without her, her legs felt weak and she felt nauseous. *This is happening, the war is starting. All because of me*. She looked around and wondered which faces would disappear before the end was in sight.

Maybe it won't be a long war, half a moon would be good. Taking the camp will give us the victory, but we'll probably have to defend our camp before we can make an attempt on their camp. She guessed that the first attack against them would ensue before dawn tomorrow.

Nightwing would be infuriated when he was kept away from his camp, once he got there he would want to organize a patrol and disperse them as quickly as possible. Scorch headed for Boulderpaw. "Has any cat come to talk to you?" she asked.

He shook his head, "No, but they keep giving me weird looks," he muttered, looking uncomfortably out-of-place and awkward as he was surrounded by cats who would in normal circumstance be no different than enemies.

"I never asked you, what were your plans regarding this? How were you going to participate?" Scorch asked.

Boulderpaw looked away, gray eyes dark. "I'm leaving ThunderClan for now. I know it'll make things more difficult for when we're helping Thunderclan if I'm not in it, but Pinefur is more likely to find out about this if I'm coming and going from place-to-place and getting wounds in battle."

Scorch understood and her heart swelled that Boulderpaw had the generosity to come help rival Clans at the expense of his home. "You're best fulfilling your duty to ThunderClan in this way," she told him. "And when we've freed ShadowClan and RiverClan, we'll go save your home," she mewed gently.

Boulderpaw snorted and turned away, "You just don't understand anything, do you?"

Scorch was half-confused and half-understanding. It wasn't that she'd said something wrong, but rather that Boulderpaw wasn't ready to hear it. He just needed some time to let it sink in. Scorch left him to ponder it out as she went back toward Flickertail to see what had been decided.

"Do you know where we should set up camp?" she asked.

Flickertail turned to her and nodded, the three cats behind him watched her with narrowed eyes but there was too much tense atmosphere to sense their feelings. "On the shore there is a cleft in the woods where there's a drop on the side of the woods, but is open to the water. Its the most sheltered place around here,"

Flickertail mewed.

"Show me," she ordered.

Flickertail flicked his tail before nodding and lead her quickly along the fog braided shore. "Here," he mewed.

Scorch felt disgust as she looked. The drop from the woods was too high to climb up, but could be skidded down. The sides sloped to the water and was completely open. "No, it would be far too easy to be surrounded and become trapped. Give me a moment to look around..." Scorch trailed off, starting to investigate the surrounding woods as Flickertail huffed in irritation.

By the time Flickertail came and found her, she had found what would become the camp. "This will be the camp," she announced. It was in the marsh, stagnant water went up to her belly and soaked her fur with a foul order. But they would have to put up with it.

The place the camp would be was a little island in the middle of the marsh. Lots of bushes already on it to be turned into dens and a strong barrier. "Why here?" Flickertail asked, the other cats he'd been talking with had followed them and stood behind him.

"Because of the water," she mewed, nodding at the swamp. "Although it won't stop Nightwing's cats, it also won't stop us. And its very difficult to move through this kind of water without making noise. They wouldn't be able to sneak up and we would have some warning," Scorch explained.

"But its in clear sight, he'll find us in no time!" one of the cats behind Flickertail mewed.

"He'd find us in no time no matter where we were. This is our best option; its not ideal, but its the best we've got," Scorch urged. The four cats looked at each other doubtfully, than one nodded and soon they'd all agreed.

"Flickertail, did you send cats to bring the rest of the Clan-cats here?" she asked.

The red tom nodded, "Yes, they should be back soon," he mewed.

"Then right now, we need to get every cat here and start setting up before Nightwing has time to come up with a counter-attack. We'll need to work fast," she mewed.

And work fast they did. Scorch worked on the island camp, weaving briars and moving bushes until her paws were covered with blood and so was the barrier. But she was proud with her work, by the time all the Clan-cats had arrived, excluding the patrol that had gone to intercept Nightwing, she had already put half the barrier into place and arranged one den already.

"Use the pokier bushes in the barrier, and the softer ones for dens," Scorch ordered, weaving bramble tendrils through the barrier to tighten and secure it. "We need three exits from the island; the main entrance is the largest, the back one is the second largest, and the third is the smallest and is connected to the warriors den," she ordered.

It was wonderful, having cats obey her orders and the work, being done by so many paws, was done before she'd exhausted herself. The sun had just passed its highest point when the last patrol missing returned. Scorch turned to get the news from them and quickly counted that all six cats were there, albeit with some wounds, before waiting to listen to their report.

"Nightwing was defeated!" Sunstar crowed, his orange eyes bright with more life than she'd seen in him. Cats yowled their joy, but Scorch noticed a few cats stayed silent. Whether this was from their doubts over the future battles or their heart in the cause, she couldn't tell. But she did notice Crowpelt yowling extra hard from his corner where he'd been mutinously arranging nests.

Scorch was glad that Sunstar was keeping their spirits up, but she knew that the higher they were now, the lower they would feel later when difficulties arose. Scorch continued working on the barrier, going over it herself three times to make sure there were no gaps outside of the exits that she could fit though without losing an eye.

"This barrier is almost dangerous to the cats in it," Boulderpaw remarked, coming over to her.

"Yeah," she agreed. She stiffened and looked at him, "There aren't any kits, right?" she asked worriedly.

"No, the youngest cat here is you," Boulderpaw mewed, nudging her. "Any cat given you a hard time yet?" he asked, looking suspiciously over at the cats surrounding them. They were all crowding around the cats that had attacked Nightwing, begging for details and drinking the words in like they were their life-source.

"No, how about you?" Scorch asked.

"Nothing," Boulderpaw looking surprised and suspicious. "Its probably because we're so busy right now, when things calm down, I'm sure they'll get petty again," he scowled.

You're the pettiest of them all, Scorch wanted to say it so bad in her moment of irritation, but she kept quiet. "Well, the barrier's already almost done. Then we just need to finish the dens," Scorch mewed.

"And get food."

Scorch stopped and stared at Boulderpaw. "Oh no! I forgot about that, how are cats going to hunt safely in enemy territory?" she frowned in musing as she ran one more briar tendril through the bristly barrier.

"We'll have to send out two patrols, one to hunt and one to guard," she decided finally. "But they'll have to stay close in case Nghtwing attacks. With two patrols out, there won't be enough to fend off a main assault," Scorch mumbled to herself.

"How could you have overlooked such a big thing as hunting?" Boulderpaw scoffed, taking the bramble tendril that was falling out from her paws and weaving it in himself.

Scorch sighed, she knew the reason why; she just didn't want to say it. "Since I'm a rogue, I've always just hunted for myself, I forgot the Clans were different," she mumbled. Boulderpaw gave a humph and they fell into an uneasy quiet.

"Boulderpaw, will I-" Scorch paused mid-speech, breath catching in her throat as she hesitated. Boulderpaw was looking at her

expectantly, his gray eyes waiting and she sensed his unscrupulous impatience. "Never mind," she mumbled. Boulderpaw looked at her, surprised. She'd never left a thought unfinished before.

And she hadn't this time either, she just couldn't say it. But she still wondered; would she be more of a burden than a help? She wouldn't be a huge asset in battle, she didn't know how to work in a group, she didn't completely understand how the Clans worked, and even her knowledge of the situation was terribly limited.

Oh, stop it, you can do plenty! You know how to help the injured, you know how to devise a strategy, and can keep things in order and focused on the end goal. She bolstered her own confidence, but she couldn't vanquish every doubt and an old feeling of not-belonging crept back in as she looked around the now half-operative camp.

A very large den had been constructed, and two smaller dens were taking shape. "What are the two smaller ones for?" she asked one of the cats; an orange tom with blue eyes whose slightly still fishy and wet scent told her he was from RiverClan.

"One is for the medicine-cat, the other will be for the leaders," the tom answered.

"Leaders? Who?" she asked, looking around.

"Sunstar and his friends, as well as the new ShadowClan leader," the tom mewed.

"Whose that?" she asked, ignoring the trill it gave her to be called a leader.

"They haven't decided yet, and I doubt they will for a moon; but that's their problem. Besides, aren't you one of Sunstar's friends? The little red kit?" the tom asked.

"Yes, I don't know who else you may have thought I was," Scorch mewed. She was slightly irritated that no cat had talked to her preceding this encounter.

"Oh, right, sorry. My name is Cedarheart, I used to be in RiverClan and Sunstar mentored me. I can't tell you how glad I was to see that

he was safe," Cedarheart purred.

Scorch couldn't help relaxing and forgiving her previous annoyance as she chatted with the optimistic tom. She had been worried every cat would be as sour as Boulderpaw when Pinefur was visiting ThunderClan; not that she could blame him.

"I'm Scorch," she mewed, introducing herself when Cedarheart asked for her name.

"Are you a rogue?" the tom asked.

"Yes, I was. Then I met Boulderpaw and Sunstar, and somehow got involved in this," she answered honestly.

Boulderpaw snorted from where he sat a tail-length away. "You were the one that got us involved with this."

Cedarheart's eyes sparkled when Boulderpaw said that. "Than you are the one I should thank for this. I can't tell you how happy I am that we're finally standing up to Nightwing's tyranny as one!" he mewed.

Scorch grinned at his glorified view of justice. Boulderpaw only seemed to see the naivete in the tom's cheerful confidence. "He's talking like the battle is already won instead of just begun," the gray apprentice grumbled.

Scorch nudged him roughly as they listened to Cedarheart launch into a half-forgotten story of an epic battle between good and evil. Scorch listened respectfully for a while, but she soon grew weary of the story. Battles weren't nearly so exciting as they were terrifying, and Cedarheart avoided the dark side of fights and amplified the glory.

Perhaps Clan cats have to, to justify their battles between themselves. I doubt I'll ever understand the appeal of conflict. She pounced on the chance of escape when Sunstar called her over; giggling as she left Boulderpaw with a betrayed look on his face that said, '*how could you abandon me*!'

"Yes?" she asked, looking up at Sunstar.

Sunstar looked down at her, his orange eyes troubled but his pelt smooth. *What kind of work has he been doing?* She couldn't hep but feel a little irritated as she thought of her bloody paws and how much they ached against the frozen ground. But she shoved the feeling away, reminding herself that Sunstar must have been doing something important.

"How do you think we should attack tonight?" Sunstar asked her.

Scorch blinked, "I didn't know we were attacking tonight," her tone edged with an accusing tone that brought the three Clan-cats that Sunstar must have been counseling with to attention.

"Of course we were, you said yourself there was no time to wait. We should try to capture the camp before Nightwing can get his bearings together; if we do we'll already have half the territory," Sunstar mewed.

Scorch narrowed her eyes up at him. "I want you to look around yourself very slowly; what do you see?"

Sunstar flicked his tail impatiently and frowned tightly as he looked around. "I see a group of devoted Clan-cats ready to overthrow the injustice they've been placed under," Sunstar mewed, much to the approval of the cats gathering around them; sensing a conflict.

Scorch sighed, were all Clan-cats idealists? Well, except for Boulderpaw, she could see him scowling from the shadows. "You may think you see that," she mewed, her tone taking on icy coldness. "But what is actually there is a group of half-starved, desperate, and unprepared cats that are already exhausted from trying to form some sort of camp in one day," Scorch stated. She could feel the indignation of the cats shooting from around her, but no cat argued.

"They are no more ready to launch an attack than you are to assume leadership of this whole operation," Scorch had never been so annoyed in her life than at the thought that Sunstar had suddenly seemed to take control of the whole plan that *she* had set up. He'd only just barely agreed to even help them! And although his already established relations with the Clans had no doubt helped them, she

disliked how he'd credited the most.

Not that she needed credit, it mattered little to her; and she doubted Boulderpaw really cared what these cats thought of him, but Sunstar needed at least to remember that they were doing this together. He hadn't answered her yet, but his orange eyes had a condescending look in them, as if he were humoring a bothersome kit by giving them the gift of speaking with him.

She gritted her teeth, *I am not from RiverClan, I am not from any Clan, you have no right of authority over me and by the way you're acting, you hardly deserve my respect!* But she knew cats were watching her; they wouldn't like to hear that.

"Besides," she mewed coolly, looking up again with a reserved look that she knew most kits were incapable of using. The look of knowing some bit of knowledge that the other would love to have. "I doubt we'll need to step outside this camp to find Nightwing," she mewed.

She would allow Sunstar the guilt of forgetting to set a sentry as the tell-tale noise of a single splash rang through the gray air. She looked up at the changing sky, "Its just past dusk, they're a little late," she remarked as cats started looking at each other in confusion and perplexed fear.

Scorch sighed, "Well, don't just stand there, prepare to fight Nightwing off," she pushed.

Cats murmured and cried out in fear and Sunstar looked at her with a blank look of horror, "You arranged for them to come here?"

Scorch glared at him, "You idiot! Any cat with two bits of sense would know that Nightwing wouldn't let this go on for longer than a day if he could help it! And we are presently still in his territory, of course he'd attack us before the day was gone!"

Now the splashing of many cats could be heard surrounding the camp. Cats were starting to growl around her, facing the entrances as they unsheathed their claws and bared their fangs.

Scorch dropped her annoyed attitude and turned to Sunstar with a small, dignified nod to show her loyalty still lay with the cause they were now guarding with their lived. "Now quit shivering and get ready to go, now is the time to prove yourself as a leader as we go forward into battle!"

Chapter 25: Warpath

Chapter 25: Warpath

Scorch hissed as her shoulder went aflame with pain. She turned her gaze back toward the enemy; a cold faced black she-cat with silent hazel eyes. Scorch scowled and flattened her ears against the shrieks of battle around her. Her small legs trembled from exhaustion and her body ached more than it ever had before in her life, but she stood strong.

Nightwing's attack hadn't yet forced them to retreat, but the battle was taking its toll. She was glad that they were not terribly out-numbered and that Nightwing himself was not yet present. She just hoped this didn't mean he was waiting back with another patrol; that would definitely crush them.

But now she had to avoid being crushed as she continued her fight while avoiding getting stepped on by other battling cats. "I don't recognize you, you're not from NightClan," her opponent observed, her voice detached and wary.

Scorch let out a snarl and slid in for the she-cat, arching her claws and trying to put as much force as she could into the slice as she spun around the side of the cat. The black she-cat gave a grunt of pain as scarlet drops flew from her lower side.

"I'm not from any Clan," Scorch growled, panting under her defiance. She was terrified right now, she had already fought another cat and had barely managed to survive long enough until Boulderpaw helped her defeat him. Now she was against a cat alone again, but this cat was less aggressive in her attacks and was smaller.

"Why is a kit getting caught up in this?" the cat asked, twisting and managing to bite down on Scorch's back leg as she tried to dodge. Scorch tore herself free and winced as she put the now damaged leg back on the ground.

"Ask your leader," she retorted. Retaliating by pushing herself into a jump to scramble on the she-cat's back and started churning all four sets of claws along her spine. The cat beneath her hissed and gave a tremendous shake which made Scorch slip from her spot; but she managed to drag her claws down the cat's side before puncturing her back claws into her side while springing away.

"You're a nimble little maggot," her opponent spat, now a look of anger in her eyes. "And what do you mean, 'ask my leader?'" the cat lunged for her, but this time Scorch was aware of the technique and dodged in time.

"He was the one that started his reign by slaughtering kits, right? So why wouldn't I fight against him! I don't want to die!" she spat. Scorch let the black cat lunge again, jaws snapping, and flashed her claws at the tiny pink nose when it was close enough.

The she-cat reeled back in pain and brought a paw up to feel the now bleeding nose. "But you just said you weren't from the Clans! You weren't in danger from us until you decided to get involved, and its a mistake you will regret!" the black she-cat spat. Her hazel eyes were simmering with fury. She had been slowly getting angrier throughout the fight.

"Maybe I will, but there's no going back. And it'll be worth it if it makes some of you see dirt," Scorch hissed, dodging the flurry of paw-swipes the cat flew at her with. They were easy to avoid, very rhythmical and far too trained. After a minute, she knew the precise moment which paw would swing at her. When one came in, she bit the paw and clenched her jaws on it.

Then her eyes opened in fear as she felt herself lifted off the ground and shaken through the air until everything was just a dark, shadowed blur. "Let go!" she heard a grunt and jaws clamped on her neck. Panic tightened her as she opened her jaws, trying to gasp in air as her opponent held her by the neck.

Grunting, and not wasting time, she thrust both paws upward at the she-cat's chin. The grip was tightened, and then released. She was nowhere for a moment; then she hit the ground. Scorch groaned, and closed her eyes after the impact, only thinking about how cold

and hard the ground was against her cheek.

She expected the she-cat to continue her attack, but the blows didn't come. She looked up- ears ringing- to see a swarm of black cats leaving. Her opponent eyed her with disgust before turning to run. "You'll be sorry for messing with Clan business, you're entering into a nightmare you wish would just kill you."

The dark words and despising glare did nothing to help Scorch forget the painful mass that composed her body. The words echoed in her and then within her wounds. Even if she knew she would always fight and refuse to give in; those words could very well become her reality.

...

Scorch shivered as she lifted her nose to the freezing air. It was so cold, ice crystals were forming in the air even though there was not a cloud in sight. But Scorch sat quietly, watching the simmering air that enveloped her in starry beauty.

She lifted her eyes wishfully to the sky, and felt depressed as the perpetually green and equally dark pine branches trapped the sky from reach. Four days had passed since the initial fight had been won, but the battle was just beginning.

And she seemed to be the only one who realized that.

She let out a long breath, watching it wreath and flow around the glittering flecks. The sun had yet to rise, but the gray glimmer and dim light successfully hid her from view. She sat on a small rise, close enough from camp that she'd be able to hear if something happened, but far enough away that it was beyond vision.

This small hill was elevated perhaps two-cats height above the regular ground level, but she liked it for another reason. There was a clear path, an unnaturally clear path, from the hill all the way to the lake. She could see it, the gray swirling mass which broke in white flurries upon the shore. The gentle, mumbling rhythm of it soothed her when she was agitated.

But now it didn't help lull the anger inside her. She wondered if she now understood why the Clans fought so much; their way of thinking and life was infuriating to her. *Boulderpaw even seems to accept it... And I always thought I was more open-minded than him!*

Four days had been spent with the Clans; four days of endless work and endless argument. It seemed her short struggle to stay in control of the operation had been quickly put to an end. Sunstar had, at the moment, complete authority over every cat. And they all just accepted it; the added 'star' in his name was enough to convince them.

She didn't understand it; even though some cats still obviously disliked him, they obeyed him. Why? Boulderpaw had shrugged when she'd asked him last night. He'd turned away and curled into his nest in the warriors den, since Sunstar had insisted that sleeping with the RiverClan and ShadowClan cats would help their relations with each other.

"Its not something you can just understand. Because it doesn't make sense in your logic; its an element of something you don't have," Boulderpaw grumbled, sounding in the thick of sleep.

"What do I not have that you do?" Scorch scowled.

"Faith..."

Faith... "But I do have that," she mewed aloud to no cat. And did they not have faith in her? Certainly she'd proved herself after the battle by helping Flickertail patch up every cat; the medicine-cat had said himself she was as efficient and knowledgeable in the use of herbs as any medicine-cat in the Clans.

Not only that, but she'd been the one that came up for a solution when hunting became a problem; proposing that instead of being confined to hunting near the camp, that several small patrols with a designated scout went hunting. So far there had been no incident and the cats were staying well-fed, or at least better fed than when they'd lived under Nightwing.

Training was ongoing and they were getting close to being able to

launch an attack, something Scorch had been giving much consideration. Nightwing's cats hadn't shown themselves since the battle, and a small scout party had reported that their scents were detected no closer than half-way between their camp and the main camp.

It had brought confidence to lots of cats; but it had brought Scorch down in spirits. She would have rather they'd shown themselves, or at least ventured closer. The fact that they were a measurably equal force as they were, but did not seem in a haste to end them, told her one or two things.

Either they're scared out of their wits; and from the experience in the first fight, I doubt that. They don't think of us as a threat, which we could use to our advantage. But unfortunately I think that this is actually a tactic for egging us on, they want us to attack them first so that we'll fall into whatever traps they've got.

And they were going to have to eventually, Nightwing had easy access to the rouge border. He wouldn't starve as the season progressed. They were pinned tightly to the lake, and once it froze the RiverClan cats would no longer get their hunting done there; they would be in a heap of trouble.

Already she could see ice starting to form on the edges of the vast blankness. In a moon of this cold weather it'd be frozen over. *But that just means we've got to-*

"Scorch!" she turned her head as she heard her name called out, the booming voice shattering the crisp stillness of morning. And as if on cue, the sun gleamed over the far-away horizon; momentarily blinding her as she squinted and turned her head away.

"Yes, Amelia?" she turned to one of the two cats that had come from Nightwing's band of rogues to help them.

"What are you doing out so early in the morning? You'll catch cold!" the black she-cat's friendly amber eyes reminded her of Mira.

"I'm fine. I was having trouble sleeping last night," she mewed, standing up and stretching herself stiffly.

Amelia frowned and padded up to her, pulling her close against her long, warm dark fur. Scorch blinked as she realized how warm it felt. "You're freezing! How long have you been out here?"

Scorch looked down at her paws and judged by how she could barely move them and couldn't feel them at all... "Since, just after midnight?"

Amelia closed her eyes and shuddered. "I've never known a kit so foolish," she murmured, pressing against her more tightly.

"I'm not a kit, I'm six moons at least. Which makes me an apprentice, by Clan standards," Scorch protested, her voice muffled against Amelia's fur. Amelia was one of the nicest cats in camp and could act like a silly kit or wise mother and switch back to a ferocious warriors in a heartbeat.

Out of all the Clan cats, she was a favorite and Scorch had a sneaking suspicion that the reason the other black rogue, Hawk, had come; was because of his feelings for Amelia. But she pushed the thoughts away, "Why are you out?" she asked, eyes drooping closed. Not from tiredness, but from contentment.

"Sunstar had an announcement, but wanted to talk to you about something first," Amelia mewed. "Come on."

She tried to pick her up by the scruff, but Scorch evaded easily and headed back to the camp at a jog. She cringed as she stepped into the marsh. The water seemed to be draining and only came half-way up her legs; but the mud was even more disgusting and cold.

The Clan cats were also annoyed with it and had been talking about making a small trail through the mid for them to walk on, not that they had done anything about it yet. But as she entered camp, nodding at the sentry who seemed to be fighting off sleep valiantly, there was no stir that Sunstar's announcements usually made.

She headed over to his den and entered without announcing herself. Sunstar sat in his nest, puzzling something in his mind as he anxiously flattened and shuffled his nest around. "Yes?" she asked, sitting down and cleaning the mud off her legs without grimacing at

the taste. *Like carrion and musty leaves, yuk.*

"Aw, yes. I wanted to talk to you," Sunstar mumbled, getting up and than sitting down again. Scorch coolly eyes him, she hated how she seemed to have lost her cheerfulness in the last few days, but right now she just couldn't force it.

"You told me yesterday that we are ready for an assault, correct?" the yellow-bellied leader asked.

"Yes... I told you that we were almost ready," she mewed slowly.

"That's good enough; we will raid the camp today," Sunstar announced.

Scorch narrowed her eyes; for a leader everyone followed to the end he wasn't particularly a great strategist. "NightClan will be at this point- no doubt- ready for us. Have you thought this through?" she asked carefully. Sunstar hadn't been listening to her lately, yet he kept talking things through with her so she had hope her words at least made him rethink things. Not that his actions had shown any sign of such consideration yet.

"Of course, but we can take them. Our numbers are about even so with our extra training we should be able to win," Sunstar mewed.

Scorch didn't bother pointing out that the other side would have been doing extra training as well. "Yes... but I'm a little wary of Nightwing right now. I think we should fight on our own terms," she ventured.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that we should lure them to the spot we want them to be and than defeat them there. A little at a time. Then with the camp weakened, it'll be easier to take it," she suggested.

"I doubt it'll work," Sunstar grumbled gruffly.

"Why?" she challenged, a hint of irritation snapping through her best efforts of staying calm.

Sunstar turned and looked at her closely, narrowing his eyes before muttering, "This kit... why do I keep thinking of Rainstone?" a look of guilty fury shot through his eyes and Scorch pretended she had not heard.

In a louder voice, "Because Nightwing knows all these places as well as any cat, we can't get any better leverage and we will win more if we get the camp," he announced.

Scorch flicked her tail. "One more thing to consider," she mewed, face turned down but eyes looking up at Sunstar. "If we attack, we won't make the same mistake that Nightwing made with us a few days back," she mewed.

"What mistake?" Sunstar asked, eyes widening.

"He didn't press his attack. He could have taken the cats that didn't come to the fight and the ones that were less injured and attacked again. I doubt we could have kept them back while being so wounded," Scorch explained.

"So you want us to do..." Sunstar prompted.

"Not want. I won't participate if we don't. Once we start attacking, we have to keep attacking until we've won. It will be hard, but we can't afford to take a break and allow them to recuperate and make the next move. We'll have to keep fighting and fighting until we win," Scorch mewed.

Sunstar looked at her and frowned, real thought going into her words this time. "That will be risky, to keep cats fighting on wounds and such low energy... But I see your point, plus we can't afford to spend moons going back and forth," Sunstar frowned anxiously.

"Lets just do it and get it done. It'll be hard for a while, but think of how great it will be when we win!" Scorch encouraged. "And we *will* win. I have no doubt."

Sunstar eyed her for a moment, the old look of respect and consideration came back and Scorch knew he was really, truly taking her words as important. "We can do it. And we will do it,

because we have to."

...

Scorch kept her eyes on the dead ground as she moved with the Clan, silently and purposefully. After Sunstar's announcement, cats had rallied and gotten prepared for the coming battle. Sunstar had kept to his original plan of raiding the camp and now, as sun-high approached, they were heading to the camp now.

The idea of striking now was in the hope that hunting parties would be out, leaving the camp more susceptible to defeat. Scorch had her own doubts of the number match-up. They had left a patrol back at their camp to defend it; even though there was nothing there to defend.

Even Flickertail was here, a bundle of herbs between his jaws so that he could heal wounds on scene. Scorch shook her head, worries flooded her head and ideas and spites of how she would do things differently swamped her and her tiny claws pricked the hard ground.

"Don't be nervous, just stay close to me," a cat whispered, she looked up to see Thistlebranch; a white, gray-brown, and drab ginger tortoiseshell she-cat that had formerly been from ShadowClan. Her blue eyes were focused up ahead and a firm determination shone through them.

Scorch just nodded; it was true that she was nervous about fighting, but that wasn't what was causing her the most anxiety. If needed, she could run and hide from the battle, she didn't see herself being stupid enough to not have an escape route at all times.

She looked again at the ShadowClan she-cat though, picking up a prickling feeling under Thistlebranch's skin. It wasn't a bad prickling, but it was a strange one. A strange, nostalgic feeling emanated from the lanky she-cat.

"Are you okay?" Scorch asked honestly.

"Yeah, but this won't be an easy fight," Thistlebranch breathed, a

shuddering sigh leaking out under her words.

"Are you sur-"

Scorch's questioning mew was interrupted by a screech as dark shadows swooped in from both sides. *An ambush?!* Even Scorch had not seen this coming; hadn't even considered it a possibility that such a force would be able to ambush them.

Soon cats were locked in combat and Scorch was swept along with it before she could blink. She was jostled and tumbled along, too small to be the first target of the opposing cats as they poured into the depression that the Clan cats had been walking through.

They were on higher ground, so they just had to wait for us and swoop in. But how?! I didn't even know about the attack until this very morning! An eavesdropper on a hunting patrol couldn't have gone back to the camp and organized such a complex attack in such a short amount of time!

Although surprised, the Clan cats recovered quickly from their shock and regrouped efficiently enough that the advantage of the ambush soon wore off. But Scorch didn't feel like the fight was even as she faced a small, but senior, black she-cat with blue eyes and- as Scorch saw sliding under her belly- a small white spot on her fur.

"Kits are fighting? Wait, I don't know you," her opponent growled, landing a light, but scathingly painful, blow on her ear.

"Well," Scorch grunted, flicking her stinging ear and feeling hot liquid trailing down her face. "I don't know you either," she panted, dodging the cat's rapid blows by the width of a whisker. *This cat is far more skilled than the one from last time.*

Fear rose in her chest as she kept getting forced back, but she angled it so that the forest was always to her back; a clear path of escape if she really needed it. When the black she-cat tripped a little on a knobby root hidden by fallen leaves; Scorch tried to capitalize on the opportunity.

Striking in, she ran an unsheathed paw down the slick, black

shoulder and- aiming for the back leg- kicked out one of the she-cat's front legs and clamped her teeth on the back leg; flattening her ears against the howl of pain and the metallic tang of blood in her mouth.

"Stupid little kit!" Scorch just clamped down harder to muffle of scream of pain as harsh fangs were embedded into her own back leg. "Let go!" she could hear the desperation in her opponent's muffled voice as her leg was pulled harder, harder, and harder.

"I can't believe you're having such a hard time with a kit, Slate." The voice... it sent shivers down her spine and froze her. Her leg was released and she released her own death-grip on Slate- supposing the name Slate belonged to her opponent- and backed away.

Her mouth was an open 'O' and her eyes slowly looked up at the speaker. Her limbs were stiff, even her badly aching back-leg had ceased its strained trembling as she looked upon the horribly awesome cat. It was a black tom with massive paws that she supposed were normally brown, but were so blood-stained they had a rouge-ish tone. His brown eyes were dark and deep, a feral, thirsting, desire hidden beneath the cold, condescending look he had plastered over his face.

He grinned down at her and the blood-stained teeth seemed aimed right at her throat. She was frozen, all she could see were those jaws, all she could see was death; and she watched it was a horrid fascination. This was a cat she'd never seen before and not even her mirages, how many terrifying ones had she watched? Had filled her with even comparable terror.

She knew was that she was going to die, killed by this thoughtless monster. And he would laugh as if it were all some great joke.

Her heart was pounding; she was in that state that she was so simply and completely aware of that tiny fact that was so natural it was normally insignificant. But now it just told her louder than ever that it was the proof of her life, and how quickly it could be silenced was the question.

Nightwing was looming over her now, his hot breath sweeping over

her face like the thick smell of rotting carcasses. "Normally when I see a cat as terrified as you, I prefer to make them suffer before I end them so that their fears may be realized. But for some reason..." and his mocking voice was turning to a growl. "I don't like the way you look, it reminds me of something I can't remember and I hate not knowing something," his lips quirked in a hateful sneer.

I was right, he's going to kill me. Nightwing was rushing down on her, jaws aiming to crush her little life and she knew that no matter where she moved he would catch her. But as any cat about to die, things seemed to be seen in an intense clarity while being completely obscured.

She saw Nightwing's incoming jaws of death, she saw Slate's blue eyes narrowing and then widening, she saw the flash of black lighting. But until her view of Nightwing was blocked by a wall of black fur did she realize what was going on.

Out of the gaze of Nightwing, she shook off the clasp of fear and looked up at her rescuer. She couldn't believe it; familiar tall, lanky body, familiar amber eyes, familiar scent, yet new to her life.

"Raven!" the snap of Nightwing's growl brought back an image of an indifferent black she-cat that had danced like Painted's shadow on a dim, gray morn.

"I'm sorry, but this kit has a few answers to my questions. I can't allow her to die yet or it will cause me much more work," Raven's voice was not sorry at all and unmoving on its position.

"I want that kit dead, and I want her dead now! Do it or I'll consider you a traitor!" Nightwing raged. Meanwhile, Scorch had observed her surroundings and knew that Nightwing's cats were on the brink of being chased off.

Come on, some cat come help out! In a few more minutes it would be won, but could she last that long? As it was now, it was more dangerous to leave the battle because Nightwing would pursue her and she couldn't escape him right now with her leg in such bad condition.

"Very well, I am a traitor," Raven's voice was heavy and exhausted. "I was planning on leaving soon anyways," she added when Nightwing hissed angrily.

"Oh really?! All I did for you meant nothing?!" the outraged leader ranted.

"It meant much, to you I'm sure. When I joined I was helping you far more than you were helping me," Raven continued. "And if I recall correctly, I did warn you that I would leave eventually."

Nightwing was silent and Scorch couldn't see his face, but she could sense his frustration. He was very disappointed at the loss of this cat. She looked up at Raven, why did the she-cat mean so much to the leader? *Does she have information? High skills? High intelligence?* It didn't seem like it had something to do with that, since Nightwing wasn't scared or nervous at her betrayal.

It was explained very quickly.

"After so many seasons of living together, it is a slight hardship to have to end your life," Nightwing mewed, his tone almost gleeful.

But before he could do anything, a yowl of triumph interrupted them and Nightwing hissed in annoyance. "Even if it is delayed, I swear I'll end both your lives before the end of the moon!" The pounding of paws faded and they were alone.

Scorch crept around Raven to see her face. Looking up she met amber eyes that were the same hue as Mira's. But they weren't warm, they were a frosty fire; eyes so cold they burned. "Your life, belongs to me," Raven growled without looking at her.

"I never agree to that," Scorch responded coolly.

"You don't get a choice. Now, convince your cats to let me into their group. I'm not ready to leave Clan-territory yet," Raven ordered.

Scorch swished her tail and waited in silence for a moment. She wasn't going to turn Raven away, but she wasn't going to do just anything that Raven told her to do. "You helped me once, I will help you with one thing. But only one thing, make a pick," she

invited.

Now Raven looked down at her, the look of staring through something. Scorch was unperturbed though, she still felt cold from her encounter with Nightwing and couldn't imagine anything else shaking her for a while.

"I'll get into your group myself then," Raven mewed and than walked away toward the wounded Clan-cats.

Scorch was watching her walk over to Sunstar when she heard Flickertail's high-pitched call for her. She turned toward where she'd heard his voice and as she bounded over there she spotted him crouched over a cat with red fur.

No... not red. She stiffened as she realized it was Sweetberry; Flickertail's sister. Skidding to a halt beside the siblings she stared down, her fear for her life forgotten as she looked over Sweetberry's gold-turned-red fur, her expression aghast.

"Where is she bleeding from?" she demanded, looking where Flickertail was desperately pushing moss into wounds to staunch the bleeding.

"Lots of places," Flickertail moaned, the grief in his voice already betraying his despairing fear.

"Quiet, we can still save her," Scorch soothed, but her own hope drained rapidly as she uncovered two more serious wounds that Flickertail hadn't touched yet. And when they continued bleeding through the thick piles of moss she held against them, her legs began to tremble.

Sweetberry was gasping out final words to those who gathered solemnly around her. Scorch didn't listen- she didn't know the green-eyed she-cat very well- but still her sight became blurry as the throbbing force behind the out-pour of the blood diminished before vanishing.

She could hear cries and sobbing as she backed-away, allowing the grieving ones the closest spots near their dead comrade. Even

though... she thought shakily, sitting down and leaning against a tree-trunk, *I've seen cats die in my mirages...* her breath was coming faster in uneven pants. *It never could have prepared me for that... I didn't even know her! And yet... she died, calmly and simply.*

She closed her eyes tight but she couldn't block out the last glance she'd taken of Sweetberry's face; *calm and smiling, comforting the ones around her even though she was the one dying.* A trickle of blood had seeped out of her mouth and one of her eyes had been gouged out as if she'd been mangled by an animal ruled by blood-lust.

"What do we do now?" she heard the voice and opened one eye to see Thistlebranch looking around, beaten and lost.

Scorch closed her eye again and wished for them to all go away; desiring to be anywhere but in the blood-spattered forest. *But I chose to come into this, I chose to help them defeat Nightwing. I can't step back now, I have to go forward... even if it means enduring this nightmare.*

She recalled the words of her enemy back in the first attack, *"you're entering into a nightmare you wish would just kill you."* She shivered, it was too true and it was only just beginning.

But she stood up nonetheless, she faced the heart-broken cats that were going to save the Clans and drew in a deep breath. "Now, we move forward. Now, we keep fighting," her teeth were gritted and her voice deep and commanding.

Then she took on a voice of deadly fury, "We're on a Warpath, and we won't stop until Nightwing is six feet under."

Chapter 26: Revolving Darkness

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Scorch blinked her eyes, it made no difference. Her surroundings were cloaked in raven black as she lay wide-awake in her nest with the sounds of heavy breathing and soft groans filling the thickly cold air around her.

The night after the deadly fight was full of doubt and darkness. Scorch's own wounds were numb and her soul was silent. She wasn't thinking as she stared at the air, void of light. That's how she felt, no light touched her and the scariest part was that she was okay with that.

Light only makes the darkness darker... She convulsed as the image of Nightwing's twisted face suddenly appeared in front of her eyes. She shrank away from nothing and was left trembling as the memory faded. Scorch felt as if Nightwing had fractured her; and now it was a count-down to when she would break.

Rubbish! You'll overcome this like always, you're stronger than that psycho! Just give it time... But that didn't help for the here and now, she wondered if she would even get any sleep that night.

She rolled over, still trembling from the nightmare in her mind. She looked at Boulderpaw who slept next to her; a tight ball of gray fur. *I'll let him sleep,* she thought, slightly calmed by the reassurance of his presence. She longed to talk things out with him, since he was the only one she felt she could share her fears with.

But these days we're so busy, we hardly have time for greetings. Her spirit was now tainted by sadness as she got up, carefully creeping out of the den full of sleeping wounded warriors. The air was cold and the light was none, it was probably cloudy.

She crept out of the camp, not being seen by the sleeping sentry who although had not participated in the battle, was exhausted from all the other work that had been left to be done by the few able-bodied cats. Scorch paused only long enough to look back and see Flickertail in the clearing doing a solo, silent vigil.

The other cats had been too exhausted and wounded to keep vigil, so Flickertail alone sent the spirit of his dead sister to her place among the stars. Scorch wondered if she could see Sweetberry's memory, but fear had too strong of a numbing sensation on her and she couldn't find any mirages in her state.

She exited the camp, wading through the marsh with silent slowness as her legs grew painful and then numb. But she was out of it and walking nowhere before long. She couldn't stand the stifling stillness of the pines and headed toward the lake, almost crying when she couldn't hear the laughing lap of waves on the shore.

She knew that ice must have formed on the edges of the lake, but she felt as if the lake had betrayed her by refusing her its comfort. She gave up, just for a moment, but she gave up and collapsed on the shore that was drenched in darkness.

Why did I lose everything all at once? But... what did I lose? She blankly realized that she didn't even know what she'd lost; she still had her two closest friends, Painted and company were alive, the cats weren't anywhere close to giving up, so what *had* she lost?

She didn't know, and it clawed at her as she clawed at the stones on the shore until her claws ached and her paws were scratched up as the smell of blood penetrated the burning chill of the night.

Scorch was alone and she stared at her paws and dwelled on that loneliness in her soul as she cried for that something that she'd lost. Then she felt something, nothing much, just a light caress on her ear; cold and soft but comforting. She looked around, her eyes not spotting anything as she searched.

Was it a mirage? But she didn't feel the usual sensation that came from a mirage, and the wind rushed around her cold and real. She

wasn't dreaming, she felt it again. But she wasn't scared, it was a relief; even if it was tiny, the relief to not be all alone.

She moved back under the pines and sat under their protection while looking out over the lake that she couldn't see. The wind swept over the land and rustled her whiskers and she forgot her teardrops. She looked up again, this time not cursing the stars for hiding themselves from her, but in wonder as a slight shine of moonlight broke through the clouds and illuminated numerous silver drops of ice floating down gray and fluffy like frozen kisses from the heavens.

She reached up in awe and let them fall on her paw as they decorated her head and her pelt. She held her paws close to her face and looked carefully at the intricate patterns of frosty beauty. She smiled, feeling her nerves drift away like this fluffy substance.

It was okay is she was scared, it was okay if she wasn't strong enough for every cat, it was even okay if she lost herself. The world brought change, and even if the change seemed dark and stiffing, beauty and peace would come in time.

Everything revolved around; if there was good there would be evil, and if there was war there would eventually be peace. *And for now, these precious moments are ones I'll remember for forever, and they will see me through.*

And when Boulderpaw found her the next morning in the forest; the snow was falling all around her but there was a smile on her sleeping face like one he'd never seen.

...

"We need to rest!"

"No! We need to keep fighting!" Scorch insisted.

"Look around you! We're in no condition to fight! And the snow will make it harder to hunt now!" her arguer, a ShadowClan cat named Frogfoot, was not happy about the announcement to prepare for another battle.

"Exactly! Nightwing's cats are in the same condition as we are, but they have a lot more territory. We will starve if we don't gain ground fast," Scorch was keeping her calm, intelligent look right now, but she was close to giving in to anger as they debated in circles.

"You both have valid points, but if Sunstar had already made a decision, we must follow it. Frogfoot, perhaps you'd like to go back to Nightwing?" Thistlebranch suggested, stepping forward and ending the little squabble.

Frogfoot grumbled something under his breath, green eyes resenting but agreeing. "Fine, but it'll be tougher for us since we have to travel further to get there and to get back," the dark brown tom complained.

"We will just have to deal with it, we won't win wars by taking the easy route," Thistlebranch announced and the gathered crowd nodded in agreement as they began to disperse.

Scorch looked up as Thistlebranch headed over toward her. "You okay? That bad leg doesn't look good for battle," the tortoiseshell mewed worriedly.

"Its okay, I'll just be careful," Scorch mewed persuasively

"Well... okay, but if you want you can just help Flickertail help the injured. Its just as an important job as fighting," Thistlebranch suggested.

Scorch hesitated, she could feel Boulderpaw behind her, willing her to agree. But she shook her head, she needed to be in the fighting for several reasons. She needed direct contact with the enemies to estimate their morale, strength, and other factors that were important for her future strategizing.

"I'll help Flickertail after the battles, but I need to be in the fighting," she refused politely and she didn't miss the worried look in the she-cat's eyes.

"Scorch, you're young, and these fights have been very serious.

Those cats aren't like normal warriors with honor, they will kill you if they can. And usually, Clans wouldn't allow cats so young to fight against honorable warriors."

"But we are not in an usual circumstance. Besides, I'm not a Clan cat. I chose to fight for my own reasons, you have no responsibility for me," Scorch reminded her gently.

"Yes... but, where are your parents? A cat your age shouldn't just be strolling through the forest on her own," Thistlebranch worried.

Scorch felt her fur prickle, why couldn't she talk about her parents? She just felt like it would be betrayal to speak of them. They were a secret from the Clans, she sensed it as much as she wanted it to be true.

"Oh, they're... not around here," Scorch mumbled quietly, hoping Thistlebranch would leave her alone. It didn't help that she could feel Boulderpaw's powerful curiosity as well. It was the one thing she'd refrained from telling him about.

"Where are they? You couldn't have traveled too far at such a small size," the she-cat stepped closer, blue eyes penetrating.

"I don't know," Scorch mewed, clenching her jaws tightly in both defiance and to keep herself from crying.

Thistlebranch gazed at her for a long moment, eyes both wanting to believe but unbelieving at the same time. *But its the truth, I don't really know where they are...* half-forgotten images of hazy gray water and crumbling sandy cliffs sparked a feeling in her heart; but only a hazy image of her parents remained; torn and indistinct.

I'm forgetting them... the realization shot through her like a thorn, hurting at first and then dulling to a throbbing that could be ignored. She turned away from Thistlebranch and Boulderpaw, looking up as her path was blocked by a pair of sleek black legs.

She glanced upward into Raven's narrowed amber eyes. "In the fight, stay by my side," Raven ordered. Scorch didn't have the energy to argue and just nodded before taking a detour around the

black she-cat. Raven's arrival had put some more hope into the Clan cats that they could win this, but not all the cats were happy about it.

Silverwing, the eldest ShadowClan cat, seemed particularly suspicious. And Amelia was strangely disturbed by Raven's arrival, which was making Raven's loyalty to them seem more doubtful. *I wonder if Amelia and Raven weren't friends in NightClan, because it feels like something personal to Amelia.*

Raven, though, kept up her apathetic and indifferent attitude. Never getting angry, never becoming happy. She took it all and continued on as she felt she needed to. Scorch couldn't decide whether it was unnerving or soothing to have a cat that didn't seem to feel any different no matter what the situation was.

Well, I'll see how she does in battle today I guess. Sunstar was out again and talking to Creekshade who would be in charge of the camp while the raiding party went out. They'd be leaving very soon but she couldn't get herself focused on the upcoming fight.

Scorch felt a surge of foreboding and looked over her shoulder. Twin green eyes watched her from the shadows, narrowed and unexplainable. *Crowpelt...*She remembered the ambush a few days ago, had it just been bad luck? Or was it that there was a traitor in their midst? The thought had crossed her mind a few times, but she didn't know what to think about it. She just couldn't decide as she stared back at the unblinking eyes that eventually disappeared.

I'll make sure to watch every cat extra closely, him in particular.

"Come on! To battle!" Sunstar's rallying cry was by the entrance and the cats appointed for the fight slipped silently into formation behind them. Scorch found herself with Willowwater and Crowclaw, a tom cat from ShadowClan that she remembered from her first encounter with NightClan.

"This is going to be a hard fight," Crowclaw grunted, blue eyes worried.

"Well, we'll just have to find a way. In this season we can't let the

war drag on forever, before long greencough will be an added danger; not to mention the longer the season grows the harder it'll be to find herbs, and food is already thin enough right now," Willowwater pointed out.

Crowclaw shivered, "So many dangers... And not many will be solved by defeating Nightwing."

"NightClan has a medicine-cat, right?" Scorch asked, eyes trained on Sunstar's yellow ears that she could just see over the see of furry backs.

"Yes..." Willowwater mewed slowly.

"I bet he's got a stock of herbs, right? If we take the camp on enough of a surprise, we'll get all those herbs," Scorch explained. "It won't solve the problem of herbs, but it'll be a help."

Crowclaw nodded, his eyes turning determined. "Right, then lets fight extra hard for every cat," he mewed.

"No problem there, but do we even know where we're attacking?" Willowwater asked.

"Not the camp yet, right?" Crowclaw asked.

"I suggested attacking a patrol, but I don't know what Sunstar decided," Scorch added her knowledge to them.

"Hmm, it would be bad to attack the camp at this time of day, its meal time so most cats would be at camp," Crowclaw grumbled, eying the darkening sky. Although covered with thick, gray clouds that had been sending teasing flurries down all day it was evident from the shadows that it was dusk.

"Oh no..." Willowwater breathed.

"What?" Scorch asked, looking around frantically to see if there was another ambush.

"We really are going to raid the camp," Crowclaw shivered lightly before striding forward with firm resolve.

Scorch could neither suppress her doubt nor voice it as the unmistakable gorse barrier that signified a camp arose in front of them. *There's only a tiny entrance! If things turn bad in there, they're going to get bad fast.*

"Its so quiet," she whispered, feeling the thick, anticipating atmosphere around her like a hot, humid day in green-leaf. But this was worse, because it was cold and unforgiving. If this was a mistake, it would be a very bad mistake.

"In we go," Raven's voice startled her from behind and she looked back at the tall, composed she-cat.

And they poured into the camp incredibly quickly. Scorch raced with them, seeing nothing but fur and gorse for a second, and then coming face-to-face with fang bared black cats. They were jumping on the cats as soon as they got through the barrier, keeping sounds to hisses so as to not alert the other cats still coming through the barrier.

Clever... they've got this plan all worked out. Although that's bad news for us, Scorch huffed as she ducked under claws and danced out of range of grasping claws. The feeling of weaving and and tumbling from dodging moonlight came back, but this time she was dodging shadows. Evil shadows.

She finally ended her dance by facing a real opponent; a black tom with white back paws and blue eyes. His shoulder and tail were swathed in cobwebs and his muzzle had a fresh scar over it. Not that she was any better off with her back leg bound tightly along with her ear tip showing off its first nick.

The tom snarled and lunged for her, she dodged and kept dodging his attacks; only sustaining a light blow to her ribs as she watched his technique. She soon realized that he was a younger cat that was trying to use raw strength to his advantage more than skill. But he was also quick enough that it would be difficult to use speed to deter his strength.

And since he isn't so trained... his moves aren't very predictable. Scorch soon found herself on the receiving end of blows as her strength

waned. Her counter-attacks weren't very effective, only scratching up his forelegs like striding through a briar patch would do, and only one good blow was landed to the wound on his shoulder that had caused it to start bleeding again and had turned his blue eyes dark with fury.

"Guh," she grunted as he slammed his paws down on her back. He was using his muscles more than his claws, but if he broke a rib or a leg, the result would be far more devastating than a few scratches.

She rolled out of the way as his front paws crashed down again where her head was a moment before. *Or if he crushes my head... that would be far worse than a nicked ear.* But she sprang up again bravely and added a scar on his chest to his collection.

"You little..." the tom hissed, lunging for her in a haze of fury and biting deep into her tail as she squealed in pain as if lifted her up and shook her. "You're as tiny as a mouse, did you think you had any chance with me?" he growled, clasping his claws around her as she helplessly churned her paws through the air, caught between his claws that were slowly squeezing her.

"Scorch," she looked up as a blur swept over her head and she heard the tom grunt, dropping her. Since she'd been dropped so many times, she landed on her feet and looked up to see Raven on the tom's back; clawing him without mercy while biting his ear.

"I never liked you, Jack," Raven addressed the tom.

"Nor did I, but I sure as heck didn't think you'd become a traitor," Jack growled, flipping over as Raven jumped off and facing her with fury.

"Nightwing offered second-in-command to whoever killed that dumb kit. I don't know why he's so worked up over her, but I'm getting that position!" Jack glowered at her, eyes flashing between her and Raven.

"Like Nightwing would share the power with any-cat..." Raven grumbled. Louder she added, "Wow, I didn't know Scorch meant so much. A rogue kit is the arch-enemy of Nightwing? How

deplorable," Raven growled in disgust.

"You should know, since you turned traitor for saving her life. So tell me, what's her secret?" Jack hissed, leaping for Raven. Scorch backed away, shaking a little as they fought, grunting and screeching. Jack wanted to kill me, specifically? She shivered, had she known she would have opted to stay behind.

But if Nightwing offered my life as to key to a high position to every cat then where is... She felt the cold, malicious eyes just in time as she leaped forward, claws grazing the back of her neck. She tripped and stumbled, looking behind her to see a stoic small, black she-cat with brown eyes.

"I don't care about that position, but its insulting that Nightwing is terrified of you. And that you cats have the gull to send a kit into battle against us. Its like a sick joke and you're about to get the low-end of it," the cat mewed in a low and dark voice.

Scorch rolled and jumped to her paws but her back leg was trembling under strain and she was exhausted. She couldn't dodge fast enough and the she-cat's claws tore down her cheek, just missing the soft part of her throat.

Gasping and shaking, she tumbled back. Scorch looked up, pained and terrified. She felt like half her face was on fire and that she was drenched with some kind of sticky liquid. Blood, its blood, she told herself matter-of-factly, trembling more. Than reality and pain hit and she could hardly breath from the pain that was located mostly over her left eye but carried down to her chin.

"That's it, I'm getting you out of here," a voice growled in her ear. She looked up blankly, seeing Boulderpaw scoop her up and then race out of the clearing with a shout from the she-cat the only thing pursuing them.

"But, the fight," she panted, closing her eyes as Boulderpaw's paw steps surged faster and faster and the scenery blurred around them.

"That fight is way too dangerous for you," Boulderpaw snapped angrily, but his voice was shaky.

"I'm okay..." Scorch trailed off, wincing as she moved her face.

"You're obviously not okay! Now fix yourself up, quick!" Boulderpaw demanded, putting her down by a stream.

"Can't do much without cobwebs," she mumbled, stumbling to the water. She looked down, eyes following a scarlet raindrop fall from her face and dissipate into the water. The left side of her face was covered with drying blood, a thin trickle of running blood leaking out from a long slice that started above her left eye and curved down along her cheek.

Teeth chattering, she dipped her paws in the water and tried to rub as much of the blood off as she could, wishing the white substance of the night before had stayed around. It had been so pretty and had melted so beautifully. With most of the dried blood gone, she groomed her face and carefully cleaned the wound that she noted with relief was only deep above her eye and turned into a scratch by the time it came close to her muzzle.

"Izz dif enouff," Boulderpaw's muffled voice sounded behind her and she almost laughed to see cobwebs collected all over him, trailing down from his muzzle like extra long whiskers.

"More than enough," she mewed, grabbing some and binding the wound over her eye in the place it was still bleeding. "We should bring to rest back to camp to use on the warriors," Scorch mumbled, feeling cold as she wondered the outcome of the battle. *Please don't let any cat die!* She prayed to nothing, feeling lost and powerless.

They started back home, weary and aching. Scorch was limping from the added wounds on top of her old ones and Boulderpaw huffed in exhaustion. He wasn't terribly injured, a few deep scratches that would need treatment, and one bite on his shoulder that seemed to be bothering him, but nothing that was potentially dangerous.

When they finally arrived at camp, their hopes were dashed. The raiding party was back and the cats were littered around the clearing, moaning and groaning as Flickertail dashed from one to another, trying to help the most injured at the same time.

But what was most unnerving to Scorch as she passed through the unguarded entrance, was the atmosphere of anger and distrust. The feelings of optimism and hope of an easy victory were gone, and they were replaced by cold distrust and self-burning fury.

Scorch shared an anxious glance with Boulderpaw before heading over to Flickertail, enlisting herself and the cobwebs to the use of the frazzled medicine-cat. "Scorch, could you go help Newtlight? She's the one seriously injured cat I haven't gotten to yet," Flickertail murmured as he anxiously placed cobwebs on a badly injured Flashpaw.

Scorch headed over to the white, ginger, tawny, and black tortoiseshell she-cat without a word and started looking over the yellow-eyed cat. "Where were you in the fight?" Newtlight grumbled as Scorch pushed cobwebs against the still bleeding wounds.

"Boulderpaw took me out of it a little before the end," Scorch murmured.

"Why?" the cat snapped angrily.

"Because-"

"Because your own safety comes first, right?" Newtlight snorted. "Typical rogue."

Scorch bit her tongue, she had done nothing to receive such prejudice. But she could understand morale was low and the cats were looking for something to blame. *But why me? I'm the one that wanted to help them the most!* Her heart twisted in her chest and she could hardly keep her paws steady as she put marigold juice in the wounds and bound them tightly with cobwebs and bindweed.

"If they start to ache, tell me or Flickertail immediately. Less herbs will be used if we cure the infection as soon as it starts," she mewed.

"I'll tell Flickertail," Newtlight answered abruptly, testing the wounds that stretched on three of her four legs and left shoulder.

Scorch nodded blankly, looking down at her newly blood-stained

paws and her torn fur. She had managed the impossible, she was more ruffled up than ever before. Her paws shook as the blood-lusting look in those two black cats came back to her.

They had wanted only to kill her, they had not been interested in anything else but the end of her life and why? Because Nightwing had wanted it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, *at least I didn't have to face Nightwing again this time... I wouldn't have been able to handle it.*

Shivering, she answered Flickertail's summons and helped him go through ever cat until the only cat left to be treated was herself. "Do you want me to help you? You look asleep on your paws," Flickertail worried when she started cleaning her wounds.

"You look worse," she mumbled. "Besides, I'm not sleepy at all," she mewed lightly, trying to persuade the tom to leave her alone in the empty medicine-cat den. And it wasn't a lie, she couldn't imagine closing her eyes and facing that impenetrable darkness right now.

Flickertail left, a stirring outside the den drawing his attention out. Scorch peered at the low stocks of herbs and than at her wounds. Looking twice to make sure Flickertail wasn't there, she began picking up the scraps of herbs on the floor; the dried, rotten, and trampled pieces that were not thought fit to use.

Carefully and slowly so as to get the most use out of them, she used them on her wounds, hoping that the small effect they had left would be enough for her battered little body. She bound her wounds tightly with cobwebs and made sure that the stores looked touched before exiting the den.

"It was a mistake to attack again so soon! Who was responsible for the idea?!" the angry, accusing voice was the first thing that greeted her as she padded out of the tunnel den.

The dark shadows of the night lay upon the camp thickly, but it seemed every cat was awake even though they could hardly see. The flashing of bright eyes filled the camp and chocking sensations of anger and blame covered the camp like a oily film.

Scorch shivered, trying to find Sunstar, pinpointing the massive tom facing the agitator; Webclaw. The wiry gray tom had white paws and muzzle in the sunlight, but he was just a slight shadow with glowing blue eyes in the night.

"I made this decision based on the words of a very smart cat," Sunstar mewed, but he didn't sound firm. Instead, he sounded apologetic. *He's apologizing for me... they're arguing over my decision.* Scorch felt sicker than she had the previous days.

"Can you believe these cats? We didn't force them into the fight, they came themselves. And no cat can perfectly plan out how a fight will go," Boulderpaw's growling mew sounded beside her and she looked at him; grateful for his support. But she couldn't stifle a guilty feeling.

"But I left before the fight was finished... I abandoned them when they fought on my decisions," Scorch mumbled, trying to keep the despair from her voice.

"You have a bad memory, I forced you out of the fight. Besides, I hate to break it to you, but you're not a particularly strong fighter. The only thing you can really do is wear down an attacker. Have you defeated a cat on your own yet?" Boulderpaw asked.

Scorch knew she hadn't, but she was close! "I'll only keep getting stronger in fights. So I'll keep fighting!" Scorch pouted.

"I think you should just stay back at camp the next time," Boulderpaw sighed.

"It won't happen," Scorch huffed.

"I know..." Boulderpaw groaned, slumping down to a sitting position, but she could hear a teasing note in his voice. He was trying to distract her from the bitter argument, and she was warmed by the knowledge that it was almost working.

"We don't want a useless rogue kit making mistakes that cost lives!" Webclaw's voice cut through her momentary comfort and she stiffened at the growl of agreement that followed.

"Scorch is an important part of this!" Sunstar roared, finally finding his voice.

"How?!" the snapped back question went unanswered as Sunstar quietly murmured something to Webclaw and the cats started dispersing; apparently sensing that nothing dramatic was going to take place tonight.

"Don't worry, they'll get over their idiocy...someday," Boulderpaw's laugh sounded forced but at least he was trying as he headed for the den.

Scorch followed him, but when she stepped in the entrance, she could sense the irritation hitting her like a wave of bramble bushes. Turning away like a whipped kit, she headed across the now deserted clearing to the medicine-cat den.

"Hey... Flickertail? Can I sleep in here tonight?" she asked quietly.

"Sure..." the tom mumbled sleepily. Scorch headed into the den, avoiding the snoring medicine-cat and curled down on the hard ground close to the herb stocks. But she couldn't sleep, she stayed awake deep into night fretting and worrying and just as quickly forgetting what she was worrying about.

I can't do this anymore! She cried inwardly as she clenched her eyes tight and allowed a few hot tears to be forced out. Opening her bleary eyes she tried to shake the anxiety and go to sleep but it came back like a wave of pulling water that would roll away and then come back twice as strong.

Her eyes scanned the dark den listlessly and her eyes settled on a brown knob. She swallowed hard, hardly knowing what she was doing as she shook the knob and pulled five little black seeds toward herself and lapped them up. *I don't care anymore, as long as I can sleep in this dark and evil world...*

Chapter 27: Spark A Fire

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Scorch sliced her claws through the fuzzy little shoots. The growing pile of moss besides her was half full of dried pieces that would have to be tossed out, but she was too touchy to be bothered with an interruption in her system of clawing up the spongy substance.

"That's enough, let's take it back to camp now," the order came from Flashpaw who was helping her. The smaller size of the RiverClan apprentice's moss pile didn't spark any pride in Scorch though. No one would notice anyways and she certainly didn't care at all.

"Okay, but I have to sort through it and make sure there are no thorns in it," Scorch mewed quietly, shifting her paws away and ruffling through the pile.

"No need, there are no elders in the camp, and the warriors can handle a thorn," Flashpaw mewed, sounding awkward under the oppressing atmosphere that enveloped them.

"Normally, I would chance it, but those warriors are injured. A thorn in a wound would both really hurt and renew the chance of infection; lets just do the extra work now and not risk the life of a warrior," Scorch sighed.

After thinking her words over for half-a-second, Flashpaw agreed and they threw out the pieces of moss that were stiff and the ones that had thorns or briars. Then, in silence, they picked up their bundles and started back as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder but far apart enough that neither could guess the others thoughts.

It had been four days since the failed raid and although some cats were still happy to blame her for the defeat, the wounds were healing and they were forgetting. But Scorch was having a hard time forgetting, between her fear of Nightwing, anxiety over the loyalty of the cats, and the worries about the future, she had been

forced to go find her own poppy head and lap up a dose of the seeds every night before going to sleep.

And she had done so in secret. Flickertail had lectured her before about how the seeds were meant to be used; only if injured cats couldn't sleep or were hysterically distressed. She supposed she could fall over the hysterically distressed circle, but the doses she was taking were heavier and put her to sleep instantly in such a state that she was oblivious to everything else and she stayed just like that until the sun rose.

No cat else had noticed, and she doubted they would. But it felt like she was doing something wrong, unhealthy even, by taking the coward's way to sleep in order to escape her own mind. *It will go away after this war, when I'm not dealing with this anymore,* she told herself that and prayed it would be true.

Now they were at camp and entered along the long wooden log that the cats had rolled through the marsh so that they could enter and exit camp while keeping their paws dry. "Lets take this to Flickertail, and then put the rest in the warriors den in case anyone needs more moss in their nests," Flashpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded and followed her across to the medicine-cat den, a small fern den interwoven with pine branches to keep it dark and covered. Scorch felt as ease in the den with the smell of pine and familiar herbs wafting toward her. She peeked in the herb stocks, nervous about how low they were.

"Will there be enough for another fight?" Scorch asked cautiously.

Flickertail let out a long sigh as he finished his thanks for the moss, "It would be very close, if no cat is seriously injured then it would be okay but..." Flickertail shook his head, his tail flicking restlessly behind him in agitation.

"Lets go put the rest n the warriors den," Flashpaw nudged her as she kept totaling up the amount of herbs left. Scorch nodded and they left, putting the two balls of moss inside the warriors den where a few cats were sleeping.

"Hey, lets go eat," Flashpaw mewed, looking up at the sky. It had been a clear day, but a haze had clouded the land all day, implying more precipitation was in their future. The sun had already set though, and lots of cats were eating beneath the illuminated violet sky.

"The stars are pretty right now," Scorch yawned, walking toward the thinly picked fresh-kill pile. A few stars of brilliant ice shone in the purple hue and Scorch wondered if she'd ever seen something so pretty.

"Hey! Come eat with me!" Scorch turned her head at the wound of the voice. Amelia was waving her tail at them invitingly, for once it seemed that she was eating alone. *Hawk must be on patrol or something,* Scorch giggled to herself.

Scorch noticed that Amelia had an extra piece of prey so she walked over while Flashpaw quickly grabbed something. "I grabbed two since I didn't have breakfast, but I only had room for one," Amelia mewed shyly as she nudged the mouse over.

Scorch noticed that the mouse's fur was messy and torn, indicating a sloppy catch, but it was plump enough that she wouldn't have dreamed of complaining as her small belly rumbled. She hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before, not that she'd allowed any cat to know that.

"Thank you," Scorch mumbled digging in to the mouse. Flashpaw ate her own finch that she'd grabbed and chatted pleasantly with Amelia about the possibility of the next snowfall and speculated about how Newtlight was looking a little plump and gossiping that she'd been spending a lot of time together with Frogfoot.

Scorch could see the two ShadowClan cats together now, she knew Newtlight wasn't expecting, but it wouldn't be long before she would be. *I know they're waiting for us to beat Nightwing, we need to beat him soon so that the cats can go back to their lives and the happiness which it brings.*

She worried about how they'd spent four days without even talk of another attack on Nightwing as she took another bite of the mouse.

She chewed it carefully, slowly, thinking it tasted a little different than usual. *But its a taste I recognize, so its nothing bad. I just don't usually eat mice.*

Scorch stood up and stretched as twilight's lingering light faded to black. "Goodnight Amelia, Flashpaw," she mumbled, walking tiredly toward the warriors den. She slunk along the edges, although the unwelcoming stares weren't as strong as on the first night, there were still a few present.

Feeling sleepy and a little achy from the day, she curled down in her nest, noting that Boulderpaw wasn't in his nest yet. Which was odd considering he was usually one of the first to go to sleep. Her stomach hurt a little and she wondered if eating that mouse had just made her feel more hungry, *I suppose it really isn't healthy to eat so little, but I'm so small and I don't do much hunting, I hate to take more...*

As her body quieted, her mind began racing with thoughts, mostly worries, and soon she was reaching for the poppy head. She shook our six black seeds and lapped them out, closing her eyes and quieting herself as sleepiness tore at her and clawed her down into the dark, silent water. She gave in joyfully, allowing her fiery mind, spirit, and soul to be quenched in that water.

But this time the water was violent, she noticed it at what she guessed was half-way through the night. The water had slowly become more stiffening and tightening so that she couldn't move or even breathe in the swallowing pool. For a moment, she was sure even her heart stopped beating in the black water-hole.

But flashes of light broke through the thick water and the water was rushing and pushing around her so that it forced her to move. But she never moved herself, she still was stuck stiff. *Whatever this is, I wish it would just go away and let me sleep in peace.*

Her mind was awake now though, even if her body was trapped in slumber. Is there something going on? Is there a fight? Panic seized her, she had calculated that Nightwing would be too wary to attack them yet until his cats were healed which would mean at least half-a-moon from now. But any cat was capable of doing the

unexpected.

Wake up! Now she was really trying to awake herself, gritting her teeth and hissing through the water. But as if to punish her efforts of waking up, the water turned singing; burning her until the pain was so intense she was sure it would wake her up.

Light flashed before her closed eyes and she could only tremble inwardly as the pain went on, becoming slowly less shocking, but still unbearable. *What is going on?! What's happening to me!* She didn't know, she'd never felt this before, and for once this was something that she'd never witnessed in her mirages. Nothing like this had ever happened.

Am I even asleep anymore? Or is there something else? She pondered that, but she couldn't come up with an answer. She resigned herself to waiting for something to happen; either for the pain to kill her or for her to wake up.

But it was almost impossible to have to wait in that drenching darkness while the pain intensified in waves and swept through her. A small relief came when she realized it was growing less intense in each wave. But than fear captured her again as she realized the light was fading and she was sinking deeper into the dark water.

Is this death? Am I going to die? Killed by something unknown to me even though I've witnessed the lives of so many other cats? Or am I simply trapped inside a dream with ghosts torturing me... Nightwing seems capable of the supernatural.

She was letting herself fall back into the deep darkness, certain it was her only escape from this cursed dream. But then something changed once again, she was being pushed by something strong and tumbled over, barely feeling her chest against something hard.

It stung her aching lungs and she could almost feel her tears in the water before she sharply reprimanded herself, reminding herself not to cry until it was all over. She focused carefully on the feeling in her chest, it hurt worse now, but she was convinced some cat had pushed her over onto her chest in real life.

But why? She didn't understand but she felt as if something was being forced down her throat. She tried to struggle against it, terrified of what was happening to her body outside of this dream. Then she moved, it was an involuntary movement, but she was moving- or more specifically- convulsing.

She stopped moving, the pain was growing intense again. Then she felt something, a slice, she recognized it clearly as a slice in an important place of her body. *I knew it, we're being attacked,* despair clouded her as she vaguely started making out shouting voices and the feeling of sticky blood covering her. She felt like she was feeling the senses of another cat far, far away as she stayed trapped and hidden in the water of sleep.

Is my little mistake, going to cost me my little life? The slice was at a cross-section of veins a little above her paw, she'd bleed to death if nothing was done to stop the bleeding and she was still trapped in sleep, even if the affects were starting to wear off.

She had given up, the sleep was tortuously exhausting and she just hoped that the things she was feeling and thinking were all just the hazy results of a stupid dream that would soon break apart and become forgotten until, try as she might, she wouldn't be able to remember a thing at all.

Suddenly, quiet rudely, she found herself thrust upward through the water-she could almost see the bubbles around her- and toward the white light that glowed beyond the water. Before she had time to wonder what this meant, she'd broken the surface and -much like a cat would gasp in breath- she gasped in sights.

She was awake, her head laid against a moss nest and blurry shapes moving around her in anxious energy. Her eyes were blurry and she wondered if she really had been underwater and tried to recollect her dream. But it wasn't just a dream anymore, her leg hurt, right where she'd imagined she'd been sliced and her whole body felt blistered from the inside as if she'd drunk liquid fire.

"What's going on?" her voice was so weak it was hardly a whisper and no cat noticed. One relief was that she could tell no cat was fighting, which both confused and relieved her at the same time. *Is*

the fight over? Or did it never happen?

Since she couldn't see much, she tried using her nose and grimaced at the pain it caused but the pine and herb scents undeniably told her she was in the medicine-cat den. "Scorch!" she tried to look up at her name, it sounded as if her ears were full of water, but she recognized Boulderpaw's worried voice and his twin blue eyes swam before her like two blue moons reflected in a rippling puddle against a gray sky. She couldn't hear his other words and just closed her eyes, letting out a tired sigh as she tried and failed to move an inch.

She stayed like that for a while, not sleeping but resting and trying to get her senses to work correctly again. But she kept wondering, *what happened to me? Am I sick? Was I hurt? How? I don't get it!* Frustration and fear took turns coming to her along with relief and peace. Relief that she was alive and peace that Boulderpaw was alive.

Finally, after what seemed like an endless night, she could see light behind her closed eye-lids and when she opened them gray-white light was shining into the den and the cold air had seemed to dispel the fire in her veins.

Scorch breathed a deep sigh of relief, it seemed that the nightmare was over.

She tried to recollect her thoughts, her feelings, but all she remembered was hazy darkness that had at one time been peaceful and at another time become electrifying with pain. *But was it a dream? Or... was there more reality than dream in it?*

After a quick glance that established that she was indeed in the medicine-cat den, she decided something must have happened. Flickertail was two tail-lengths away and seemed to have fallen asleep in a slumping position. She added the evidence that there were no leaves littered on the floor and the scent of blood was not in the air, only on her fur.

I don't think we were attacked, but why was I bleeding? And why is it so hard to move? An attempt to sit up ended in a half struggle that left

her muscles and nerves in painful knots in her legs and shoulders. Now they felt harder to move than before.

"Flickertail?" her tongue rasped so much she could barely hear the words in her throat. *Why does it feel like I ate a bunch of thistles?* Her throat was so dry that a breath hurt and she was sure there was not a drop of water in her mouth.

"Flickertail!" she tried again, but it was too quiet to wake the sleeping tom cat. Grunting, she stretched a leg to grab a small pebble. Gritting her teeth against the pinched nerves, she swung her leg and the pebble hit Flickertail.

"Wha? What?!" Flickertail jumped up, fur spiked and eyes wide.

"Flickertail," she tried to mew again. Flickertail heard her squawk and was instantly by her side, his eyes scanning her anxiously and his paws moving around on her to check different things.

She was silent, waiting for his inspection to end before asking what was going on. "Your heartbeat is still irregular... but I think the worst danger is past," Flickertail sat back on his haunches with a long sigh that turned into a laugh. Scorch stayed silent as his faint laughter changed to a sob and he heaved a couple breaths to steady himself.

"What in the world... happened?" she asked anxiously, even more nervous after Flickertail's odd outburst of emotion.

Flickertail stared at her long and steadily, his amber eyes round with an intense but drowning emotion. Pity. *I don't understand...* She realized she didn't understand a lot of things and she felt tears of fear rise, but she pushed them down as she waited for Flickertail to answer.

"Scorch, what do you think about leaving for a bit? Just for a little while. You could go visit your parents again..." Flickertail's suggestion died down as Scorch vigorously shook her head as well as she could.

"I can't do that, but, please just tell me what happened. Why do I

feel like I can't even move my tail?" Scorch felt herself almost begging, dreading to hear the words but needing them nonetheless.

"Scorch, it would be safer if you left for the time being. Go stay with your friends again for just a moon or even less," Flickertail was now begging, a pleading look plastered on his face so sincere she was sure it would have convinced others.

But not her.

"Tell me first! I'm not going to agree to anything until you tell me what's going on!" Scorch cried almost angrily. *Just tell me already!*

Flickertail closed his eyes and took a deep breath in both resignation and preparation. When his eyes opened, they were glazed and cold and she felt like she was shrinking under the intense attention. "Scorch, there's no other way to tell you this; you were poisoned."

...

Poisoned? Even now the word was alien to her. After telling her, she had gone into deep silence and Flickertail had left her, but promised that there was a trusted cat on guard to make sure nothing happened to her.

Poisoned how? She hadn't eaten any plants that could have poisoned her, she knew. Poppy Seeds, in case of an overdose, would have just made her incredibly sleepy for a few days. They weren't life threatening unless one ate many, many, poppy seeds; and six weren't enough. *It would have taken at least fifteen to put my life at risk, so I know that's not it.*

Scorch shivered inwardly as she laid, still half paralyzed from the effects of the poison. Flickertail had explained to her that the poison wasn't a natural poison found in plants, but in snakes. She hadn't believed him, a piece of prey bitten by a poisonous snake would have been eaten and no cat would have brought back already dead fresh-kill for precisely the reason that something harmful may have killed it.

But then... what? That was also the reason that she'd been cut open, after they had made her throw up anything in her stomach and nothing had happened, they had cut her open since the poison had affected the blood in her veins and had been lucky enough to get the worst of it out while not bleeding her to death.

She turned cold at the next thought that came into her mind, the thought that had surely occurred to every cat by now. *This couldn't have happened by accident, no way. Some cat specifically tried to kill me, but was it random or intended?*

Nightwing could have sneaked poison into their food supply somehow, it was possible in a number of ways. Or was some cat targeting her life specifically in her own home? And if so, were they in Nightwing's group, of were they here?

I know I haven't been the favorite cat lately, but surely no one would try to eliminate me in such a way?! She was trembling again and all her fear, distrust, and suspicion was aroused as she started suspecting cats. *Yesterday, Frogfoot gave me a weird look. And Crowpelt was staring at me again. And Newtlight snapped at me. And, and, and...*

"Hey, Scorch! Are you feeling any better?" the anxious voice sailed to her as Boulderpaw raced through the entrance.

Scorch looked at him, trying to keep her bubble of laughter in as she looked at the shaggy-furred apprentice. "What happened to your fur?" she laughed, the white dusting it was frosted asymmetrically onto his long fur and gave him an old, rumpled appearance.

"There's a freaking snowstorm going on, and you ask why I'm covered in snow?" Boulderpaw snorted.

"Aw, I want to see it!" Scorch's curiosity pulsed and she once again tried scrambling to her paws. This time she was able to roll onto her belly and- with more than a little help from Boulderpw- ended up on her four legs.

"What's wrong with your legs?" Boulderpaw asked, nudging one of the trembling limbs gently and causing her to collapse.

"Its really hard to move right now," Scorch hissed through her teeth. From what Flickertail had said, every cat knew about what had happened to her, but she didn't really know how much they were aware of. She wanted to see if a rumor of her being poisoned had started an atmosphere of fear; that was the last thing they needed.

"Here, just wait a second," Boulderpaw grumbled, crouching down beside her and sliding her two forelegs over his back so that she hung over him. "Hold on," he huffed as he lurched to his paws, and she swayed along with him but stayed fairly square on his back.

"Lets go see the snow," he mewed not at all happily. "I don't know why you want to though, its cold and wet and keeps the prey in their holes. Even if it was cold, at least the prey still dared to come out in the good weather," he grumbled all the way as he tottered to the entrance, turning to allow her to see outside.

Her eyes widened and she blissfully lost herself in the view of the swirling and dashing snow. The thick clouds made the snow look more gray than white as it had in the moonlight that one night; but the pristine flakes had covered the ground in about a mouse-length of thickness and had drifted against the dens and barriers.

"Grrr, I want to go jump in it so badly," Scorch groaned, paws itching to bounce through the piles of fluffy substance that reminded her heavily of a cloud.

"No, you don't. Its cold," Boulderpaw snapped.

"Oh, shush," Scorch ignored him and began looking for cats in what seemed to be a deserted clearing. "Where is every cat?" she asked.

"In their dens, what does it look like? No sane cat would want to be out in that."

"What do they know about... what happened?" Scorch asked.

"I was hoping I could ask you that," Boulderpaw mewed, surprised.

So they don't know? But they know there was something wrong with me at least. Do they know it was poison? Or were they not even told that much? She looked down at Boulderpaw, his ears flicked almost in

her face as she strained to raise her head.

"So you don't know why I was sick?" Scorch asked in a whisper.

Boulderpaw shook his head and a tremble went through him. "Flickertail wouldn't say, but it looked bad... really bad. I honestly thought you were going to die," Boulderpaw's sigh of exhaustion suggested to her that he hadn't slept at all last night after the poison had taken affect. *But if it was something I ate... than why was it in my blood stream?*

The thought shook her, she hadn't connected that before. How had she even been poisoned? Was it possible that a snake had bit her in her sleep? *No, all the snakes are asleep... but how?!* She was shivering with fear and she asked Boulderpaw to take her back to her nest.

"I don't know what happened either, the more I think about it, the more I don't understand it," Scorch closed her eyes.

"What do you mean?" Boulderpaw asked, his breath on her ear.

"Flickertail said I was poisoned, but how?" Scorch shivered and she felt Boulderpaw jump beside her.

"Poisoned?" he echoed in a detached and frightened voice.

"But the poison was in my bloodstream! So its not something I ate... and I'm pretty sure I would have known if a snake had bit me. Besides, they're all asleep by now, right?" she looked up Boulderpaw's horrified face and tight mouth.

He gave a tense nod. "You have to go looking for snakes in a hole to find them in this season, all the elders said that they sleep through winter," Boulderpaw grumbled, pacing anxiously.

"I really don't understand it," Scorch anxiously sheathed and unsheathed her claws. "But there's one thing I am sure about," she mewed firmly, looking up at the gray face in front of her.

If living in fear and desperation got me to this point with these cats, than I'm going to live happily and energetically; after all, it can't get much worse than a cat trying to kill me, can it? "I'm not going to let the fear

get to me. I will be vigilant, and I will be cautious; but I will also do whatever I want to and what I think is best," Scorch declared.

Boulderpaw looked at her for a moment or two in silence, then a small grin appeared. "Just what I would expect you to say."

... Raven's POV ...

"It seems Scorch is already up," Raven nodded in agreement to Shadebreeze's comment. She narrowed her amber eyes as she watched from the entrance of the warriors den as Scorch bounced around in the snow drifts. The kit's moves were stiff and she frowned now and than as if it were still difficult to move.

What happened yesterday? The night that the blizzard had begun, in other words two nights ago, Scorch had been dancing with death. Even Raven was perturbed by what had happened, *she'd been obliviously in deep pain, but also in deep sleep. Honestly, its a wonder that Boulderpaw even managed to wake up, she was so quiet.*

Every cat was uneasy over what had happened, she could sense it as clearly as any cat. Flickertail had refused to tell them what had been wrong with Scorch, and Scorch herself refused to talk about it. A mysterious illness and refusal of explanation from some of the most trusted cats wasn't a recipe for peace. *Although, Boulderpaw seems to know. Was she sick? Or was it something else?*

Most cats believed it had been some strange illness and were worried it was contagious, but Raven knew better. Sicknesses were not cured by bleeding a cat. But then again, she didn't know what was cured by bleeding a cat.

But it worked, and Scorch seems to be out of danger for now. Her paws itched, Scorch couldn't die, she needed to talk to her! An insatiable desire drew her to the kit and all she wanted to know was: why? What did this kit remind her of? Was it because Scorch had been traveling with her sisters? Or was it something else?

Raven licked the furs on her back into place and used to it as an opportunity to watch the cats behind her. She knew she had done nothing to make herself a favorite of them, but they seemed

accepting for the most part. *Except for that one...* she ignored that cat entirely and went back to watching Scorch.

The tiny red kit was racing back and forth from the medicine-cat den, helping replenish the poultices on the wounds of the warriors. Yesterday Sunstar had led another attack. Raven had taken part in it, but hadn't found it anymore dangerous than a training session with Nightwing had been and she felt no more torn up over it.

The fight had done generally little, one NigthClan cat, Rita, had been killed in the battle but there had been no clear victor. Although Scorch had seemed to come up with a new scheme as she recovered from her sudden illness; and now seemed to be bouncing around with three times as much energy as before.

She studied the kit; Scorch had a genuine smile plastered on her face and a cheerful voice that Raven could tell was endearing herself to the Clan cats. *She seems more alive than ever after almost dying, what happened?*

The atmosphere of fear that had come with Scorch's sudden near-death encounter had been turned right around and Scorch's stubborn refusal to acknowledge any fear or be worried about it in the least was starting to catch on with the Clan cats.

I can see it all, even if no cat else realizes it. Scorch has sparked a fire in these cats that have been dead for moons. Now its only a matter of time before it fans into a fire and then not even Nightwing will be able to keep them down, no matter what.

Chapter 28: Black Globe

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"Here, if we wrap your paw like this..." Scorch frowned in concentration as she carefully bandaged Cedarheart's sprained paw in a fresh comfrey and tansy poultice. The leaves were few, but she'd crushed them with the oil from cobnuts to thicken them enough for the poultice.

"Thanks! That already feels much better!" Cedarheart thanked her, testing the paw on the ground.

"Good! And if it starts to hurt, feel free to come to me. I'll help you out anytime!" Scorch gave a lop-sided grin up at the orange warrior.

"I will, don't worry," Cedarheart purred in appreciation before turning and limping across the snowy clearing to the warriors den.

Scorch hummed happily as she rubbed her paws in the snow to clean them. She felt like she was living again, and she was living in a bright world with dazzling moments and courageous cats. The war- for better or for worse- was a sort of game to her. Especially since she hadn't been allowed to fight in the last few scuffles that had occurred.

Not that any of them had been dangerous, they had mainly been one-sided for the aligned Clans and been the result of her newest strategy. She had realized that full-on battles were too even and unpredictable, they could go either way and that's not what the cats wanted and it had needed to be changed.

Scorch had also noticed that it was harder for the cats to find enough prey to feed them all. So she'd taken on a risky strategy and organized a dangerous system of raiding NightClan's hunting parties; beating their cats and stealing their prey in one swoop.

This was dangerous because- not only did they need a cat to spy on

every hunting party they wanted to strike- but it was such a vital blow that Nightwing would be forced to respond whether they were ready for it or not. But other than the strength of the hunting patrols being increased, Nightwing hadn't seemed to take many countermeasures yet.

Scorch loved this game of guessing and wits. A game that she had the advantage of by sensing other cats' emotions. She wondered if the reason Nightwing hadn't done anything was because he was waiting for his spy to come back with a detailed report of the strategy.

Scorch was convinced there was a spy among their ranks. Not only had there been no strange scent around the camp or in the fresh-kill pile, but the method of her poisoning was almost impossible for an outside cat to have accomplished. The problem was, she didn't know who it was yet even though it had been five days since her poisoning.

But that fear had been thrown away, she didn't care. If she caught the cat, they'd be punished. If they killed her, she wouldn't have to worry about them anymore anyways, so why stress out over it? Those were the thoughts she told herself. :ate at night, when she was as honest with herself as possible- for no cat could ever be completely honest- she knew that she was lying to herself and to the world. Next she would find herself reaching for her poppy seeds. Even though they were the reason why she hadn't woken up when her assaulter poisoned her.

But in the daytime, she agreed with the world that lying to herself and enjoying life was better than being honest and broken in pieces. *I will never go back there again, there's always hope every morning that this day will be better and one day I'll wake up and what I tell myself now will be reality.*

"Scorch, could you come help me with this?" the call came from Flashpaw and Scorch bounded over to her. Flashpaw had been dragging a bunch of pine branches and Scorch grabbed them and helped her. When she grabbed them with her mouth and twisted her head awkwardly to drag them, she felt a pinch of nerves. It was the long-lasting result of the poison.

"Where do these go to?" Scorch asked awkwardly around the branches.

"The medicine-cat den, there were a few holes created by the last snow-fall," Flashpaw answered.

When they were there, Scorch helped Flashpaw patch the holes without being asked and when they were finished they smiled at each other and went back to their duties with mutual peace. Scorch felt a warm glow in her belly that glanced off the snow and made even the gray sky seemed to smile as the clouds created art from their wispy fluffiness.

"Boulderpaw! How was your day?" Scorch asked cheerfully as they settled down for their nightly meal together. Since she was poisoned, Boulderpaw insisted that she eat with him and allow him to pick out her food. She supposed he believed she'd been poisoned through food since she'd never given any cat- not even Sunstar- the details that she had discovered.

For one, she had discovered faint fang marks on her paw near where she'd been sliced open by Flickertail to bleed out. The medicine-cat himself hadn't even known they'd been there when he cut her there that night, but they both agreed that was why the bleeding had worked. Although the scent on her paw had been covered with too much blood to tell who had done it and there were no other clues. But the bite marks had confirmed one thing; a cat had done that to her.

But the question is still who, why, and how?

"My day was fine, and yours? Nothing happened?" Boulderpaw pressed.

"No, of course not. I had a lot of small jobs to do. The latest raid was a success though, I'm just worried about one thing," Scorch chirped.

"What?"

"I'm worried that Nigthwing is going to start poisoning the prey to

kill us. I want to take more territory soon so that we don't have to rely on this so much," Scorch explained.

"Can't we just beat him?" Boulderpaw sighed.

"That's what I mean, but don't say that outloud," Scorch shushed him, looking around quickly to make sure no cat was watching them.

"What? Why?" Boulderpaw snapped in annoyance; he was obviously tired and not at his sharpest point.

"First off, you know these cats get excited when they hear that kind of talk. Secondly, we don't want *that* cat hearing our plans," Scorch reiterated.

"Are you sure there is a spy here? We've been together for about half-a-moon, I would think we would have noticed a spy by now," Boulderpaw grunted.

"That would depend on the sort of spy this cat is. If its a good spy, and I assume it is, we wouldn't necessarily have noticed. Or maybe this cat only recently became a spy and at first was loyal, it'd be harder to see the blurred lines," Scorch explained.

"And you're sure this cat is a good spy?"

"Considering that this cat poisoned me and got away with it in a den full of cats, I am compelled to think of this cat as a very good spy," retorted Scorch in a grating tone.

"Okay, okay, I get it. But do you have any idea of who this cat is?" Boulderpaw mewed in a testy tone.

"I'm still suspicious of Crowpelt, he's the only cat that I don't understand," Scorch mewed.

"What about Amelia? Or Raven? Those two are trouble if you ask me," Boulderpaw grunted.

Scorch felt a pang of guilt, she felt the same. "I suspected Amelia at first because she was the one who gave me my meal before I got

poisoned. But I wasn't poisoned through food and I can't really say anything against her character, nor can any cat else. Raven seems to be more likely to be a spy because she joined after we even began this, but I just don't get that kind of feeling from her," Scorch sighed, facing a dead-end in the pondering investigation once more.

"No cat really seems to be a spy, and sometimes I wonder if a cat from NightClan had just found a really good hiding spot around here," Scorch added, scanning the thick pine trees again. She had even braved her worrisome fear of heights and climbed ever pine tree that was close enough for earshot in the camp but hadn't found anything.

"I get what you say about Amelia, and at first I though she must have been a spy because she seemed too perfect. But she has one thing really going for her," Boulderpaw conceded.

"Consistency," they mewed together at the same time.

Scorch laughed and Boulderpaw snorted. "All the Clan cats say that she's been nice and helpful to them for a very long time. Its not like she just suddenly changed when this happened, and no cat knew about it until a moon ago because we hadn't even decided to do this until then! It just doesn't add up against her in my opinion," Scorch sighed.

Boulderpaw nodded in agreement. "Well, we can keep an eye on Raven and Crowpelt. But Raven is a valuable fighter and Crowpelt is a former WindClan, even if he did desert them. We can't persecute them without proof."

"Yeah," Scorch yawned, rubbing a paw over her eyes and looking up at the moon that was a hidden, radiant glow behind the clouds like a bright spirit hiding its brilliance while reveling in its own mysteriousness.

"Lets go on a walk," Boulderpaw jumped to his paws.

"Its too late, I want to go to sleep," Scorch yawned again while slowly getting to her paws in languid contentedness. She could feel herself stiffening and knew it was time for sleep. "Besides, its cold,"

she complained as Boulderpaw ignored her.

"I thought you loved the snow," he teased, taking a paw of snow and tossing it over her head.

"Oohh! I'll get you for that!" she squeaked as she shook the freezing substance off her fur and took off after the running gray apprentice, instantly awake.

They dashed out of the camp and up and down slopes, skidding through the freezing, slippery snow. "Oops!" Scorch laughed as she jumped as Boulderpaw went down a small slope right in front of her and she fell into him. He was knocked on his side and she slipped on her belly; they both ended up skidding for a long while in a tangle of legs and snow.

"Ugh, where are we?" Scorch asked when the world stopped spinning and she'd sat up. They weren't in the forest anymore, the sky was a giant soft black cloud that she could just jump, flip, and fall into. Boulderpaw was lying beside her, breathing heavily while keeping his eyes closed.

Scorch looked around and noticed that they were encircled by deep, black horizons and then she came to a realization. They weren't in Clan territory anymore. They were on the lake, right in the middle with not a soul knowing they were there but themselves.

"Its beautiful, the whole world silent and still around us," Scorch breathed to Boulderpaw.

"Hmm, I don't find it beautiful," Boulderpaw spoke in a cold, distant tone that she'd learned to recognize one he used when reminiscing. "The night it like a living nightmare, black and cold and full of fear."

"That's not what I see," Scorch got to her paws and stared deeply into the black sky. "I know the night to be full of life and mystery. The sun dulls things with too much brilliance, but in the night nothing is manipulated," she purred her words like she was kissing soft snowflakes with them.

"The night hides things, evil things. It plays tricks on your eyes with shadows and predators until you're running from yourself," argued Boulderpaw.

"No, the night does not hide things. It is us that hide. The shadows don't play tricks, they dance, and we just can't understand their dance. The world is full of beauty at all times, some cats just can't see it," Scorch was reaching up now, her eyes catching onto a gray, falling snowflake that gleamed in the faint storm-light of the moon.

Boulderpaw was silent and she could see his blue eyes watching her from the corner of her vision. Her heart was reaching out, reaching out to the sky and the intricate ice they sat upon. For a moment, she loved everything in the world again and she felt herself searching for mirages to prove to herself that life had gone on for seasons.

But there were no mirages on the ice. It didn't remember the past cats because it kept changing. No ice was formed the same way twice. That knowledge brought her both faint disappointment and vigorous excitement.

They -she and Boulderpaw- were in a point of history that had never happened before, that would never be repeated, and would never be remembered. She looked at Boulderpaw, the snow falling on her head softly. "When we finish saving the Clans, what will happen to me?" she whispered- not scared or sad- just quietly curious.

Boulderpaw watched her a long time and she desired for him to give her some impossible answer. When he didn't say anything she sighed with a small smile. "Maybe I'll jump in the sky and become the sunset and I can watch all the Clans every day and you can look back at me when you want, and ignore and forget about me when you'd rather."

"No, when we finish saving the Clans, I'm sure you'll find something more useful to do," Boulderpaw broke into her dabbling fantasy with a matter-of-fact tone.

Scorch snorted and laughed, that was so like him to say. "I suppose

I promised Mira that I'd go find her again and we'd continue on our search to find my parents," she fell on her back, wriggling in the snow covered ice.

"Find you parents?" echoed the gray tom cat sitting beside her.

"Yeah... I guess I never did tell you," she mused. Scorch had never felt comfortable revealing anything about her short life before entering upon the scene of the Clans. But right now, when she knew no cat other than Boulderpaw would ever know these words, she felt herself opening up.

"When I was four-ish moons old? Not even half a moon before I first met you, there was a big storm and I got separated from my parents in it," Scorch explained.

"How? Didn't you just stay inside your den?" Boulderpaw asked.

"Our den got flooded in the night and when we were escaping I fell in the water and got woke up the next day, washed ashore some place I'd never been before," she spoke softly and sadly. Scorch felt like she was desperately grasping at a time long gone by. Even though it was only two moons ago, so much had happened since than that she knew she could never look at the world the way she used to, she could never think the way she used to, and she couldn't feel the way she used to. She looked at the ice and gently ran her paw over the shiny, cold substance.

I like the ice, it can forget things. Something I can't do, something not even the trees can do, because when they die, they turn into dirt and then spring into grass or a bush or another tree.

"Painted found me on the shore and we started trying to find my parents. That's when we met Moonkit -er, uh, sorry, Moonpaw- and we ended up coming here. Well, you know the rest. Its not that grand of a story," Scorch brushed it off as Boulderpaw stayed silent and watched the sky.

"Something wrong, Boulderpaw," she thought she could just sense the prickling of emotion from him. Confusion ensued when she thought the emotion just barely resembled that of guilt. *Guilty about*

what?

Even a moon before, she would have been suspicious by that emotion from him, but not now. She knew Boulderpaw better than any cat else and she knew there was no way that he would ever betray her or do anything to harm her. It was just impossible for him to do something, and just as impossible for her to believe it.

"I just... realized that this whole time I've been complaining about having my home taken over and the death of my father. And you've actually lost your home and both your parents. I never even thought to ask," Boulderpaw talked slowly with a tremble in his voice. He was emotional, but it wasn't his words that were displaying his emotions. They were covering for something, just an excuse.

Scorch hummed, she didn't care. If there was something Boulderpaw couldn't tell her yet, she could wait until he could or respect his wish not to tell her. They were friends, after all. "Its strange though, I feel sad when I think about my parents. But I no longer having the burning passion to go find them, does that mean I just don't care about them enough anymore?"

Her question remained unanswered as they laid together in comfortable silence with the snow decorating their whiskers and swearing secrecy. They were just two souls- burning for different things and touching never- but still together in that black globe cats called a world.

...

"Where did you find these herbs?!" Flickertail's voice squeaked like a kit's from his excitement as his eyes hungrily drank in the sight of the mouthful of herbs.

"Who could have guessed that a few half-dead pieces of grass could make a cat so happy?" grumbled Boulderpaw in Scorch's ear.

Scorch shrugged. On the way back that morning from the lake, Scorch had picked up a sweet and intoxicating scent and unearthed a few plants that she'd never seen before. But the smell had

reminded her of another herb and she'd brought them back just in case.

"I never even knew that catmint grew in this territory! I guess that's because I'm a RiverClan cat but still... Where did you find these?!" Flickertail demanded, intense gaze scorching her.

"Uh, there was a... Boulderpaw called it a Two-leg nest, and outside the wall around it I caught the scent of these and thought they might be useful," Scorch explained awkwardly.

"Were there any more?" Flickertail demanded as he carefully started preparing the herbs for storage.

"N-no, I didn't notice anymore, anyways," she mewed.

"I'll go look again later, but I trust your nose," Flickertail mumbled as his tail flicked ecstatically behind him.

Scorch turned as Flickertail started mumbling to himself about what needed to be done next and what he hoped to find. "What now?" Boulderpaw asked as they stood just outside the entrance to the medicine-cat den, faint sunlight filtered through the thin clouds and gave a soft radiance to the fresh snow.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to do some investigating. Than hunt a little if nothing happens," Scorch mewed.

She was staring straight ahead, but she could feel Boulderpaw's disconcerted look. She turned her face toward him. "Yes?" she answered his unspoken question.

"Why would you do *that*," he growled under his breath.

"Hmm?" she blinked at him blankly, feeling a question rise from her. "I haven't been hunting for a while, it'd be nice to go do a little hunting," she explained.

"That's not what I'm taking about," he hissed, blue eyes flaming with impatience and fear. "Why would you do something as risky as investigating by yourself? If you find the right cat you can't stop them from killing you," Boulderpaw growled under his breath near

her ear.

"You worry too much," Scorch yawned but noticed he wasn't nearly convinced. "Look, I don't even have a clue about this cat and I wouldn't do anything that suspicious and if the cat is a good spy, they wouldn't do anything near enough to camp where my blood could be seen, right?" she prompted pushily.

"Right..." Boulderpaw repeated still unconvinced.

"Well, then, you'd ought to find something to do. Later," Scorch jumped off as she noticed a certain black pelted cat leaving camp at that moment.

Okay... The first cat I either want confirmed or denied in this little investigation is Crowpelt, he's obviously the most likely. Though he's almost too obvious... or maybe he used reverse physiologically? Naw, I'm probably giving him way too much credit.

She discreetly followed the black tom at a distance. He hadn't been on a patrol so she supposed he was out hunting, or at least that's what he'd want the cats to think. *Although I don't think I'd be lucky enough to catch a cat in the act of treachery so easily.*

But she started getting wary as he ignored the few precious scent trails they crossed, striding forward with unwavering firmness. *He either is going to a specific place to hunt, has no sense of smell, or is sleep-walking.* That's what she told herself, especially since they were near the lake heading toward the abandoned RiverClan territory that was no where close to NightClan's borders.

Technically, RiverClan territory belonged to NightClan, but they'd never used it and surprisingly Pinefur had never claimed it. *Too much territory for so few cats probably.* But Crowpelt was obviously heading for that territory and Scorch felt a jump in her heart as she realized that the uninhabited territory was probably the perfect place to meet a cat and transfer intelligence.

She stopped in the shadows- half hidden from view by the tree she was pressed against- as Crowpelt stopped at the border, still in thick shadows himself and green eyes surveying his surroundings. Scorch

was once again thankful for her small size that made it easier to hide as she narrowed her dark eyes as his gaze skimmed over her without any start of surprise. *Either he's totally aware of me, or not at all. It's hard to tell, he's so calm. But he has a plan for anything that may happen.*

Not more than a few minutes after Crowpelt had arrived, another cat approached him from the RiverClan side of the border. Scorch blinked and frowned for a moment, she couldn't see the other cat clearly. It had jumped from under foliage to the shadows in a heartbeat. It was dark-furred though, long-legged but small, and had round amber eyes.

The two cats conversed for a little bit but they were too far away for Scorch to hear. She tried to creep closer, but as soon as the snow creaked under her paw, Crowpelt had whipped his head around and her heart thudded heavy with fear as she shrunk against the tree trunk. But her perfect silence appeased him and he turned back to the other cat, though he kept one ear cocked back towards her.

Scorch gave up on getting closer and focused on the feelings she could sense from them. Attaching herself to the earth to amplify her ability while trying not to entrench herself in it so that she'd be swamped by mirages. The general feeling she picked up was wariness, intrigue, and turbulence.

They're not at all content with something. Is it our recent success? If that cat is from NightClan- and who else could it be?- this feeling tells me that they are stumped. Which is a good thing, but this also is pretty solid proof that Crowpelt is indeed the traitor.

That hit her hard. This black cat before her eyes had poisoned her in such a way that she could not even understand? Put her through that misery and continued to watch her without a word? And he was a Clan-cat for goodness sakes!

She felt sick and the desperate need to get out of there overwhelmed her as she turned and crept away as quietly as possible before breaking into a a dash as soon as she was out of ear-shot.

Birds sang and the light and pine trees made beautiful pictures of blue and white on the snow, but she was oblivious to it all as a relapse of fear overtook her. Momentarily turning all her spirit and determined optimism as dead as the snow for a moment.

She stopped abruptly and found herself slipping before she was flung into a drift of snow when her paws were burning and her lungs even more so. Panting, she laid on her back with her gaze swirling and blurring. *I'm... crying? What the heck's going on?!*

No!

She shook her head furiously and jumped to her paws, swaying at the sudden change of motion. She wasn't going to go back to that dark place, she was free and she wasn't going to change who she was because of other cats. *I need to go back to camp and warn them about Crowpelt before he returns. I don't have solid proof, but its enough to merit a Clan-held investigation.*

Scorch started off toward the camp, struggling through the snow drifts and laboriously holding her breath to a steady pace. She was deaf to her surroundings, her thoughts preoccupied with Crowpelt's betrayal and wondering just what he had been doing and how long.

This could explain the ambush that one time, though he would have had to leave as soon as the attack was announced. I don't really remember seeing him... but back than every cat kind of just blurred together.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Scorch paused abruptly as she heard a thumping of paws and the scratching of claws. Where? She looked around hastily, seeing nothing but the barren white snow that was alternately gray-blue and white with the shadows. No bushes, no color, and no cats.

Scorch frowned and moved forward a bit more, the snow creaking beneath her small paws. *There...* faint, hoarse breathing vibrated in the air around her. There was definitely a presence she was missing. She strained her ears and drank in the air.

She couldn't hear anything, but she continued to sense it. She didn't

smell anything but she imagined it was just beyond her reach. The small red and black cat blinked her dark green eyes as a mirage hopped through the snow in front of her.

She watched it in an almost fond curious way like a mother watching her kit stare at the world for the first time. It was a slim silver tabby mirage, probably a she-cat from the sense Scorch got from it. *So it was you who I was sensing?*

Appeased, she stepped toward the mirage, feeling herself fall into a trance with the mirage. Those blue eyes... they were brilliant and held Scorch's gaze, almost as if they could really see each other through the space of tine. Scorch stopped, this wasn't real. This cat no longer existed, she was just playing with forgotten time. Dabbling with past reminisces.

But she didn't care anymore- or was it that her heart could no longer tell the difference?- this cat was real to her. It was a lovely secret and these were her friends that she'd never meet. So she stepped forward and reached for the cat again.

Crash!

Scorch screamed involuntarily as something slammed on her back and flattened her to the ground in a heartbeat. Her head spun and she felt the need to throw up as her own scream echoed in her ears.

"Ugh," she groaned and tried to lift her head, fighting the confusion and pain in her head as she strained her eyes open. Lights flashed, colors swam. She saw white, gray, green, brown, and black but couldn't assign any shapes to them. And another color appeared; red.

Slowly her ears were draining of her scream and words were becoming incessant babble again as a shape stepped in front of her. It was tall and black and her mind told her it was Crowpelt, but all her senses were scrambled. Scorch could feel her neck trembling as she lifted her head and it swayed from side to side and her eyes flashed back and forth involuntarily.

"Its- while- but- you- quickly," the words flooded and faded as

Scorch vacantly tried to find where her legs had gone so that she could get away form this cat that obviously meant her harm. But she couldn't find them at all and she may have been back floating in the dream waters completely paralyzed.

She couldn't see right, she couldn't hear right, and she couldn't think right. That much she knew. She didn't know who this cat was, but she knew that she had known this cat. She didn't know what was going on or what going to happen, but she was certain she didn't want to find out.

Just get away, that's all you have to do right now. Don't think, just leave. She told herself that, but it did no good when couldn't hardly feel her legs in the dazed stupor she'd been put into. As a result- no doubt- from the concussion she had just suffered from the jarring hit to her head.

The cat stood above her with what seemed to be a black paw raised. And just for a split second, Scorch's eyes focused and she recognized the cat. Shock thrummed through her as her eyes lost focus as a massive head-ache hit and any balance she'd mustered for a moment flew away.

The paw came down in a blur of black and than white exploded before Scorch's eyes. Blurring, unfocused, dirty white. Colored spots swam before her and she uttered a small noise before all of her strength left her and she collapsed to the snowy ground and everything finally turned black.

It was indeed a black world

Chapter 29: Deadly Eyes

Chapter 29: Deadly Eye

"Snake-pelt!"

"Flea-bitten rogue!"

"Heartless murderer!"

"My... that's a lovely compliment..."

Scorch held her breath as her hearing was pounded upon by a stream of insults that was broken only by hisses, growls, and grunts. *Those voices... are familiar.* She attempted to open her eyes but pain exploded and colors danced behind her closed eye-lids.

"Scorch!" she heard her name called and it came from a voice that made her heart jump and put everything in place. *That's right, I was attacked by **that** cat and than **she** jumped in front of me and saved me. But how?* Scorch could feel the cat who had called her quickly nuzzling her over and she stiffened when a gasp of horror was uttered.

"Quick, we need to take her to someplace safe," Scorch's muddled senses barely registered that she was picked up off the ground and swung through the air as the cat carrying her broke into a swift run.

"Wait..." Scorch panted. "What about-"

"Painted? She is fine, that cat is no match for her," Mira's proud purr near her ear carried her trust in her sister.

"Why?" the red and black patch kit gasped out.

"Its a long story... I'm sure you'll hear it later. Jump, we can stop now," Mira ordered the tom cat that was evidently carrying her.

"Scorch, can you open you eyes?" Mira's voice was close and

worrying as Scorch felt herself laid down on her back on the cold snow.

"No... not yet. I'm too tired," Scorch's voice broke into a mumble as sleep threatened to overtake her. She could feel it looming; a thick, heavy, pain-killing escape that- as her pain increased when she resisted- seemed more appealing.

"Don't you dare go to sleep!" Mira's uncharacteristically sharp voice startled her enough to be taken away from the border of sleep, but it soon wore off and the restful land loomed even closer.

"I said, 'don't you dare!'" Scorch jumped and her eyes popped open as Mira cuffed her ears hard. It hadn't hurt much, but she could feel the sting of a fresh scratch in the open air.

Her vision was blurry but she could sense the desperate worry of Mira and Jump clearly. She realized they were pressing snow to the back of her head where she guessed she'd been hit. "How bad- huff- is't?" Scorch's words slurred and her eyes slid back down, but sleep was a long way off now.

"Its pretty bad and it won't stop bleeding," Jump's voice was tight but frankly honest.

"That's why I'm sleepy," Scorch mumbled in her throat. "Find cobwebs instead, and bind it tight," she forced her mind to work for a moment and was able to utter the words.

She heard a quick, uneven patter of retreating paws and Mira's scent faded slightly while Jump's anxiety grew. "Just stay awake for a few more minutes," he coaxed, voice smooth. Scorch wished he would use his usual harsh tone, it was making her more sleepy with that honey-smoothed voice in her ears. She was clawing away from sleep, but it loomed closer and closer until it was on top of her.

Crack!

The slight sound of the creak of snow shot through her like a bolt of lighting. *That* cat's scent drifted to her, the scent of blood was just penetrated by the cat's deadly scent. "Jump," she grunted, feeling

the gravity of the situation fall more heavily than sleep.

"Stay awake," he coaxed in response.

"No..." Scorch forced her bleary eyes open even though she couldn't see anything anymore. She lifted a trembling paw that had no power and pushed Jump's paws away from where he'd been pressing snow to her wound. "Behind you."

"Hmm?" Jump's questioning mew was broken by that cat's sardonic voice.

"My, still awake are you, kit? That won't last for much longer," the cat's tragically psychotic laughter sent invisible shivers down Scorch's spine. She could feel Jump's fur bristling- in fear or anger, she couldn't tell- beside her.

"Scum-bag!" he hissed. "What did you do to Painted?!" he spat.

"The spotted cat? I'm not going to tell you!" the cat used a sing-song voice that fell back into creepy laughter as if this was some great joke. Scorch wished it were.

Jump yowled as he leaped from beside Scorch toward where that cat seemed to have been. Scorch felt helpless as she lay totally paralyzed and listened in desperate horror to the sounds of battling cats. "Sorry, small fry, I don't have time to bother for you. That kit has caused just a little too much trouble to be aloud to live," hissed the attacker.

"Oh yeah? You must be a pretty sorry cat if you can't even deal with a kit!" Jump challenged. Scorch winced as he gave a whimpering yowl after the smacking sound of a well-aimed hit.

"I'll come and finish you later, you can watch that loud-mouthed kit die," hissed the attacker in disgust.

Scorch shivered inwardly as she felt the cat stand over her, warm breath rippled through her whiskers and she felt blood dripping on her muzzle.

"You know, Scorch, I did actually like you. You were amusing and I

would have been happy to let some other cat kill you. But you got a little too clever. I tried to kill you peacefully while you were in your sleep, but I suppose you couldn't just die that easily, no?"

"No," Scorch breathed, once again struggling for her eyes to open. She was sure that they were blankly black, but out of sheer will-power, she focused her gaze on the now scratched black face that was crowned with two feral amber eyes. "Not by a cat such as you, Amelia."

"Watch those words of yours, they can be quite hurtful," Amelia purred. "Well, close your eyes now. Its time to go to sleep, darling," her face took on a wide smile with downcast, hungry eyes.

Scorch felt fear chill her trembling body. She couldn't move; that was a fact. Jump and Painted couldn't help her fast enough, and chances were Mira wasn't close enough either; not that she'd be much use in a fight or escape with her still injured leg. Scorch had been in near death situations before, but she'd never been so completely helpless.

"No!" she could hear the screaming gasp of Jump and knew any moment now she would receive the blow that would end her short life.

But it isn't all bad, right? The Clans have started to help themselves and this won't stop them. The traitor is undoubtedly revealed... Wait! She stiffened as she realized the only cats that knew now were Painted, Jump, Mira, and herself. If she died, and supposedly Painted and Jump, she didn't know if the Clan-cats would believe Mira over Amelia.

Which means... its not an option that I die now! Come on, do something! She opened her eyes enough to see Ameliea's hungry jaws swooping down for her neck. She didn't think about how the look in Amelia's eye was identical to Nightwing's; an eye that only wished to see death and had already seen plenty of lives ended. With a severe grunt of effort, she rolled away. Since she'd been on top of a snow drift, gravity worked in her favor.

"So you did have a little energy left? You're only delaying the

inevitable," Amelia growled as she watched her with a snow-coated muzzle and annoyed eyes.

Scorch desperately stretched a paw forward and clawed through the snow, managing to wriggle away a few inches before Amelia's paw slammed down on her side, breaking any strength she'd built up and renewing a rush of pain.

"You are painfully desperate, aren't you?" Amelia sounded gleeful as she stretched her claws through Scorch's skin.

"No," huffed Scorch.

"No? You can't even open your eyes, but you keep running away!" the black cat laughed sadistically.

"No, if I were desperate, I'd plead to your better nature. My death changes nothing, Nightwing will still be defeated and justice will be restored. My death will only light a self-justice fury in the rest of the cats. It'll give them a fiery spirit that nothing will quench," Scorch hissed defiantly.

"Oh, hush now. You talk too much about things that don't matter. Nightwing- or should I say- my *father* has far more strength than you cats could ever rabble," Amelia purred.

Scorch froze, "Father?" she echoed.

"Oh, yes, I never did mention, did I? That was why he entrusted me the job of being 'friends' with the Clan cats this whole time. To gain their trust and know all of their little secrets. We put down three rebellions that way, and no cat ever knew. Your little surprise rebellion was ill taken care of because I didn't know until that morning and my father had already left on a boundary revision expedition," Amelia growled, claws grasping Scorch's side tighter as she got angrier.

"And to think that a tiny little *worm* like you, thought you could outwit *my* father! This is divine punishment, kit. Be glad that I prefer a quick kill to torture!"

"Hey! If you're so quick, then talk afterword! I don't care about all

that junk. You're a bad cat to me, and you want me dead. That's about all you need to say!" Scorch snapped.

"Great idea; goodbye, maggot," snarled Amelia.

Scorch relaxed, she'd heard it. The creak and scratch of claws. Just like before Amelia first attacked her, but now she knew that her chance of survival was out of her paws and solely in those of another.

"Guamph!" snow and blood sprayed Scorch's limp body as Amelia was tackled by the other cat.

"Oh my goodness!" Scorch would have shaken in relief if she hadn't been so numb. Mira hobbled over to her and quickly dragged her away from the tussling cats. "Whose fighting?" Scorch asked.

"Two black cats, I don't know one, but the other was the one trying to kill you. What happened?" Mira demanded, voice close and loud in her ear.

"Explain later," Scorch mumbled as relief granted sleep a kinder path. But she was too curious to fall asleep now as Mira hastily bound her head wounds with thick cobwebs, mere fox-lengths from the battling cats.

Scorch tuned her attention to the battling cats. Her rescuer seemed to have the upper paw as he fought the already battle-worn Amelia. "I always hated you cats, and I was always looking for an excuse to kill you," snarled the cat.

"Funny, I thought you were the only one still loyal to Nightwing. I thought I could have trusted you to help me. But I guessed wrong," Amelia mewed cheekily, but weariness and fear were creeping into her voice.

"Oh... I'm loyal, I always remained loyal. It was because of my loyalty to WindClan, that I ended up in this situation!" Crowpelt snarled. A few smacks followed and soon the sound of wriggling and snarls came from Amelia.

It was abruptly cut off by her scream and than silence.

Scorch was quiet, Mira was silent, even Jump had paused his heavy panting. "Amelia's dead?' Scorch guessed, now completely unable to do anything but think and speak.

"Yes," Mira whispered huskily.

"Crowpelt?" Scorch called softly.

"Yes?" the tom answered in his usual gruff voice.

"Thank you, and I'm sorry," Scorch mewed.

"You're welcome," Crowpelt answered in a tired sigh. "I'm glad I happened to pass through here. Some cat's are just sick, Nigthwing and Pinefur are included on that list. Although I admit I never knew she was Nightwing's daughter, I didn't even know he had a mate," Crowpelt pondered.

"Me neither, but we can think about that later. Would you help Jump? The white tom over there?" Scorch asked.

"You're in much worse shape, kit; but I'll help them back to camp. They friends of yours?" Crowpelt asked as Mira picked her up, swaying a little with her unbalanced legs.

"Yes, and there's another one, Painted? She's back there a little," Scorch mewed. "Mira can show you," Scorch added, realizing she didn't know.

"Alright, I just hope this doesn't cause too much trouble," the black tom sighed.

...

Trouble deferentially followed. In fact, that would be a ginormous understatement. The initial shock immobilized every cat for half a day, and then the noise it did cause. And that was just over Amelia's betrayal. The noise over the arrival of Scorch's friends, the secret of Amelia's heritage, and the black she-cat's death was enough the cause the earth to quake.

Scorch was lucky enough that she slept through most of it,

unconscious in the medicine-cat den with the worrying faces of Mira, Jump, Painted, Boulderpaw, and Raven around her. Of course, Raven and Painted kept glaring at each other with silent bitterness and Flickertail was constantly having to shove around the crowd in order to help the kit.

By evening Sunstar had set out some sort of order among the restless and disheartened cats, and Flickertail had announced that Scorch would recover with proper rest. The news settled down the last bristling furs and cats retired to their nests.

Suspicion and uneasiness had formed around Scorch's rogue friends, and there was a little squabble about where they would sleep- since even for the Clan cats- it was without question that they deserved an overnight stay. Painted soon made it clear that they'd stay in the medicine-cat den with Scorch and- albeit a sigh from Flickertail- the matter was settled without opposition.

The medicine-cat forced Raven and Boulderpaw to their own nests for the night so that every cat could lay down without touching each other and night descended in on the tired atmosphere at the end of a catastrophic day.

The next morning the first to open their eyes was a particular red and black kit who was feeling a little too stiff after lying in the same position for hours. Carefully, Scorch rolled onto her other side, finding herself now facing a sleeping Painted.

A breath of relief escaped her and the kit felt better as she eyes the cobweb bound wounds on Painted. None were fatal and they were all safe. A smile glanced off her face, yes, they were all safe after the storm of yesterday. Already the memories were fading to become a blurred past in the mists of morning, remembered only by the swamping and confusing emotion of fear.

Scorch closed her eyes and sighed, it was exhausting what had happened. Amelia had been trying to kill her all the while. Every time Amelia had shone heart-touching concern for her and had watched over her motherly, she had just been studying her and waiting to strike. *She just wanted me dead. And she tried her best, twice. I still don't know how she pulled off that poison, and I assume I*

won't ever know now.

What scared Scorch the most was that she'd never really suspected that Amelia could be capable of that. She hadn't taken her unusual twinges of unease serious with her. She'd thought Raven was far more likely, but she'd been so wrong.

Could she trust any cat again? Even after being so confident in Amelia, she'd been the one that tried to kill her. And she'd given Scorch the same blood-lusting look Nightwing had; they'd wanted her dead and nothing short of death would stop them.

Scorch sighed and looked up at the pine branches, was this how it felt? For some cat out there somewhere so desperate to kill her that they'd do it by any means necessary? It filled her with fear that was black, cold, and inescapable.

But I'll burn that fear away; I have to and I can. They won't break me like this! I absolutely refuse to let them win! Defiant strength coursed through her and it was realized as she sat up and paced to the entrance.

She squeaked and fell back on her rump as she looked out the den and her nose touched the nose of another. "Sorry," she mumbled sheepishly, looking up at the surprised face of Boulderpaw.

"Oh, uh, I didn't think you'd be up," Boulderpaw mewed, but he looked away.

"I was too angry to sleep anymore," she bubbled, feeling the simmering fury stir again.

"Its really getting to you, huh?" he sighed as she started pacing outside the entrance of the den. Her small paws soon creating a small, trodden down snow area.

"Of course! It'd get to you if the last cat you suspected turned out to be trying to kill you! Not only that, but she was totally insane! How did I miss that?!" Scorch hissed under her breath.

"But you did suspect her, didn't you?" Boulderpaw frowned as he sat down.

"Well, yes, her placement in a few areas made her a suspect. But I never actually *believed* she could be the one," Scorch explained, lashing her tail furiously.

"Hey? Is you head okay?" Boulderpaw broke in with a tone of worry.

"No, it hurts like nothing I've ever felt before. Even the poison was more numbing pain than this. But that's beside the point!" Scorch was too angry to be stopped by the ache in her head.

"If Flickertail finds you pacing like this, he'll be angry," the gray apprentice warned.

"I'm already angry enough," the snarling voice was unmistakably Painted's and Scorch looked at the cream spotted she-cat standing in the den entrance, a shadow over her eyes as she glared down at them. Obviously, Painted was not in the best of moods with a snarl on her face and that glare in her eyes.

"I'm fine; I'm thinking," Scorch ignored the cat and continued pacing and muttering. Even so, she didn't miss the crackling glare shot between Painted and Boulderpaw. *I was not even aware they'd ever met, is it like with Sunstar and Boulderpaw? Where they instantly hated each other? I still don't understand though.*

"Wait!" Scorch stopped pacing and held her head and tail high in the air. Boulderpaw and Painted had broken their glowering match and stared at her in puzzlement. "Where's Crowpelt?" she asked.

Painted retained her quizzical look, but Boulderpaw's cleared. "He's in the warriors den. He was there most of yesterday after you got back," the gray tom answered.

"I need to talk to him," Scorch announced.

"You may come with me than, I need to talk with him too," Scorch looked over at Sunstar. Noticing the serious look in his eyes, Scorch felt a little unnerved. She wasn't alone since Boulderpaw didn't make a sarcastic comment under his breath and even the bold Painted didn't demand anything from him.

"Okay, I'll go with you then," Scorch mewed simply.

"He's already waiting in my den, let's go," Sunstar answered.

"Hey, wait a minute, I'm coming too," Boulderpaw stepped forward.

Sunstar sighed but nodded tiredly and Boulderpaw jumped to her side as they followed the leader to his den. Sunstar's den was constructed of briar and ivy and had been built directly into the barrier so it was tall and spacious. Of course, this was so that he could hold private meetings with other cats while still remaining in the safety of camp.

As Sunstar had said, Crowpelt was already inside, his green eyes narrowed and Scorch felt a prickle in her tail. She was fairly certain now that Crowpelt had not been trying to kill her, but he had still met some mysterious cat at the border yesterday. Was he another traitor? She doubted it since he killed Amelia, but he certainly had some sort of secret.

But Scorch only felt mild curiosity as she sat down across form Crowpelt with Boulderpaw next to her and Sunstar settling down adjacent to them and Crowpelt. "Well, Crowpelt, shall you tell her or should I?" Sunstar asked.

Scorch tensed, feeling the spark in the air. These cats were agitated and even Boulderpaw could feel it as he shifted next to her. But Scorch remained perfectly still with her ears pricked and shoulders straight.

"I will," rumbled Crowpelt, his green eyes landing on her with that inexplicable expression.

"Yes?" Scorch answered with stiff calmness.

"Scorch, Amelia's not dead," the black tom announced.

Scorch felt herself jump a little in shock, but she quickly recovered and willed her racing heart to slow before the others heard it. "I thought she was. You said she was," Scorch mewed in a voice that betrayed nothing. But she could feel just the inching of fear creep along her spine.

"I though she was dead as well, but when we returned for her body after we'd returned to camp she was gone. There was only one path of footprints in the snow and they were staggering with blood around them. So we believe she is alive and was not just dragged away before we returned," Crowpelt explained. A look of anger flickered in his eyes and Scorch was unsure if it was directed at Amelia or at himself.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that now," she sighed. She could feel Boulderpaw's bubbling anger as clearly as if she'd been standing next to a roaring fire. She imagined she could see the steam filtering out of his ears.

"You should have followed the trail then! And why tell the Clan that she was dead?! You announced she was dead after you came back that second time!" Boulderpaw snarled and his voice sounded like the chipping of bark.

"The Clan was already scared enough by her betrayal, it would have been far worse if they'd known she was still alive out there," Sunstar mewed. Scorch could understand how they wanted to reassure the cats, but lying was not the way to go about it.

"I don't care if it would be better! Its safer if they know that a deranged, murderous, lunatic is on the loose rather than to believe they're safe!" Boulderpaw spat.

"They already don't think they're safe. And I don't expect them to be seeing Amelia anytime soon, considering the state she was in. We can only hope that she dies from those wounds," Crowpelt growled.

Scorch sighed, this squabbling was only going to go on. "I understand why you didn't want to tell the cats, but you should also know lying is not how you maintain a bond of trust. It will be more dangerous if that already thin trust is broken than an atmosphere of fear. I'd advise that you tell them the truth now before it looks like you're hiding it from them," Scorch mewed with a heavy tone which resulted in her accent being sharpened.

Sunstar started and stared at her for a moment while Boulderpaw nodded next to her and Crowpelt observed her silently. "You remind

me more of her everyday," Sunstar murmured under is breath and Scorch's ears twitched, but she didn't even want to know what he was thinking about.

"I see your point, but I think we can wait until Nightwing is defeated before we tell them," Sunstar reaffirmed.

Scorch shrugged, "Well, that's your decision. But I still advise against it. If they find out... well, a simple apology or feinting ignorance won't cut it for these cats; just keep that in mind," she warned, staring Sunstar hard in the eye. "You're already creeping on thin ice with these cats, pray that nothing else goes wrong."

Silence descended upon them until Scorch looked from Sunstar to Crowpelt. "Now for you, start talking," she snapped, feeling dizziness start to set in. They needed to do this fast so that she could get back to sleep.

"What do you mean?" Crowpelt asked in languid calmness.

"I may no longer believe you are a traitor. But you still have a secret, right?" Scorch got right to the point.

Crowpelt blinked as Sunstar and Boulderpaw looked at him with mixed curiosity and wariness. After an intense staring contest, Crowpelt broke off first and and closed his eyes for a moment. "Fine, I'll tell you as long as you promise to keep you mouths shut about it," Crowpelt grumbled.

Scorch narrowed her eyes and nodded, Sunstar gave a growl of agreement but Boulderpaw stood up abruptly. "I won't make a promise I can't keep, so I'll be leaving now," he muttered, side-stepping around them and walking out of the den.

Scorch watched him go, "At least he's honest," she sighed pointedly. Sunstar rolled his eyes and nodded at Crowpelt to start.

"First off, I want to assure you its nothing bad. In fact, its probably helpful," Crowpelt mewed, looking straight at Sunstar.

"No cat here is aware of my mission except for Shadebreeze, but seven- almost eight moons ago now- when the Clans fell, I was

given a mission," Crowpelt hesitated here and got up to make sure there were no eavesdroppers.

"Its top secret and commissioned to me by my leader herself, rest her soul, on her deathbed just before WindClan was taken over. I was ordered to go join Nightwing's group and relay their actions with one WindClan cat so that when the main center of WindClan was freed, we'd have eyes on Nightwing to keep him from making a move before we were ready," Crowpelt explained.

"Then why keep it a secret from us when we're working toward the same goal?" Sunstar asked. Scorch remained silent, something didn't... fit.

"There were reasons for that. One was that I wasn't too sure there wasn't a traitor among the ranks, which I was right about. Two, no offense, but you and Boulderpaw are from different Clans than mine and Scorch is a rogue kit. I wasn't convinced about your motives or what you were doing," he excused.

"Was the first battle not convincing enough? Or did you need two more?" Scorch questioned.

He blinked, eyes landing on her for a moment. An intense spark flashed between them and Scorch wondered if this was how Sunstar and Boulderpaw had felt; instant and inexplicable disgust. But they were both less obvious than those two, and their eyes remained clear and unchanging.

"And what is WindClan planning?" Scorch asked. "You haven't been too happy about something, have you?"

"I wasn't happy that you were almost killed, but I am glad that I saved your life," Crowpelt's tone was full of meaning.

Scorch remained silent as she listened to the rest of his tale. "Because of this effort, I hope to be able to go back soon and rejoin WindClan. I hope you won't mind," Crowpelt asked Sunstar although his tone said he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer.

"Of course, Boulderpaw and Scorch won't be sticking around either.

Its perfectly fine," Sunstar waved it off. He didn't seem completely convinced either, but he wasn't going to push it.

"You won't either," Scorch snorted, getting up and stalking toward the entrance, a troubled feeling in her belly. As she brushed past Crowpelt she whispered in his ear, "No cat can lie to me, and we both know Pinefur would kill you the moment he saw you. You're not fooling any cat, I'll be finding out your real secret soon."

Chapter 30: Blurred Lines

Chapter 30: Blurred Lines

"Be careful!"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"You should just come down."

Scorch flattened her ears against the murmured opinions of Painted, Mira, and Jump. It wasn't like the doubts weren't already in her head as she stood with her back paws on Boulderpaw's shoulders and her front paws reaching up against the cracked-brick wall.

"Almost got it!" Scorch hissed as she stretched her claws out as far as she could. Having been continuously kept out of all patrols as she 'recovered' from her head injury for the past seven days, she had dedicated herself to scouring the territory for herbs.

Of course, she wouldn't even be allowed to go out alone. Boulderpaw joined her in stolid determination to watch her every move and Painted- with her ever watchful eye- wasn't far behind. So that was how her entourage had come about. Though it wasn't all bad, it was annoying when every cat felt it was their life-given duty to give their nagging opinion about everything she did.

"Come on! You're heavy!" Boulderpaw puffed out the words between breaths and Scorch could feel his shoulders trembling through her back paws. Because, of course, she wasn't tall enough with him on all four paws, he was stretched up, standing on his back paws with his forepaws resting against the wall for support just like her, except he was holding her up.

"Just... a little... further," Scorch grunted as she stretched all her ligaments to their limit and finally grasped the fat, green clump. As she did so, Boulderpaw's front paws slipped from the wall and he fell, taking her with him as she tore the herb from the wall.

She, however, had enough air space to land lightly on her paws while Boulderpaw got a face-full of snow. "Ugh, I hope that plant is worth this," Boulderpaw grumbled as Scorch laughed at his expression- which was angry- but the snow on his face gave him a fluffy look; thus his anger looked all the more hilarious.

"Yep! Its tansy! Very useful for a variety of things, from sprained paws to coughs," Scorch proudly stroked the herbs. The Twoleg nest was the only place left in the territory where she could find green things left. On the brick wall encircling the nest the overwhelming ivy growing over the wall hid a surplus of medicinal herbs that were protected from the cold and snow underneath the tangled strands. Of course, it was just a *little* difficult to grab them.

"This place is pretty nifty, but its right on the border with Nightwing right now. Why doesn't he use it?" Painted asked. Even though she was unhappy about their current residency with the Clan cats, she couldn't seem to help but listen.

"Probably because his medicine-cat doesn't know where to find herbs. Flickertail didn't know either, since he's from RiverClan," Boulderpaw explained.

"Oh," Mira didn't look like she understood anymore than Jump or Painted; but they didn't question anything.

"Well, lets get back to camp. Its getting late," Scorch yawned as she finished speaking while the cats nodded and grabbed the piteously small bundles of herbs they'd collected. Even though they'd been there since sun-high and now the sun was gone, they only had a few pawfuls of herbs. Still, since it was leaf-bare, finding any herbs was impressive.

"When we get back, you need to put these herbs away. And then we need to talk," Painted more or less ordered.

"Talk about what?" Boulderpaw growled through his mouthfuls of herbs.

"Careful that you don't crush them," Scorch warned him through her own herbs.

"About stuff, but you're not invited," Painted growled, looking down at the apprentice with a green-eyed glare.

"I suppose you're talking about when we're going to leave?" Mira asked, limping steadily besides them.

"Yes... among other things," Painted mewed, walking faster and leaving them behind a little ways.

The four cats were quiet for a few minutes as they watched the shadows fall longer and turn a few shades darker. "It looks like it'll snow again before morning," Jump observed, the last bit of sunlight was showing that a cascade of clouds were sweeping over the sky.

"As long as it isn't slushy snow, it won't make that much of a difference," Boulderpaw mewed. The two toms were soon talking about the snow, particularly which type of snow was better for hunting and fighting in.

"Hey, Mira, is your leg okay?" Scorch asked quietly. She'd been more than a little alarmed when she'd realized Mira was using her leg strenuously.

"Of course!" purred Mira. "It aches a little in the cold, but this time it really was ready for walking on. I just can't run or jump or anything yet," Mira mewed.

"But you ran during the fight," Scorch fussed a little and felt guilty that she'd allowed herself to be attacked after promising Boulderpaw she'd be cautious. *But in my defense, I thought it was Crowpelt, and I knew he wasn't anywhere around me. So I didn't really use caution...*

"Well, yes, but that was an extreme need. And I just did extra resting the next day and it was fine," Mira sounded optimistic. Scorch didn't know whether to believe her or not as she looked at the formerly broken leg. It flexed and bent a little awkwardly, but still in its natural course. The fur was dull and the skin looked thin, but Mira walked on with a bright shine to her eyes that was enough to cover for the injured leg.

"How soon do you think Painted will want to leave?" Scorch asked, willing to change the subject for now.

"I don't know. But knowing her, she won't want to stay long," Mira responded, eyes face steadily ahead.

"Why did you guys even come back in the first place?" Scorch had to admit she was curious, but she hadn't been brave enough to ask that in Painted's presence.

"Well, uh, that was for a... variety of reasons," Mira sounded awkward and her eyes turned upwards at the steady cover of snow-frosted pine branches.

"Like?" Scorch pressed, she could sense Mira's uneasiness- though any cat could tell Mira didn't want to talk about it- but Mira usually gave in under a little pressure.

"Well... like, we were worried about you... and we couldn't go far with my leg and the snow..." Mira tried misdirection, but Scorch definitely wasn't going to fall for that.

"So you decided to come where it was more dangerous? And another thing, how did you get past Nightwing? You would have had to cross through his territory to get here," Scorch questioned. Although she was pretty sure they had come from RiverClan territory, she asked it anyways to pressure Mira.

"Oh... uh... well, it would have been more dangerous to go-" Mira broke off abruptly and stopped walking. Scorch stopped with her and looked at the older she-cat, dark eyes glowing in the hazy twilight.

"I know what you're doing, Scorch, and it isn't nice to do that. I'm sure Painted will explain everything to you later, so just be patient," Mira mewed firmly.

Scorch couldn't help but feel a little guilty that she'd been trying to take advantage of Mira's good nature. But she'd been about to give something away! Surely is wasn't really wrong to look for information when she had a right to know it?

They finished the trip back to camp in a silence that matched the frozen stillness of the white world around them. They found Painted waiting for them at the camp entrance and Scorch's fur prickled under Painted's searing green gaze.

"You two bring those herbs, then, Scorch, you come meet us right here," Painted growled warningly, there would be no argument from them.

"Yes, ma'am," Boulderpaw grumbled behind her as they passed through the swamp and into the camp, trekking over to the medicine-cat den.

"Hello?" Scorch called into the shadowy den. "I don't think he's in there right now," she mewed to Boulderpaw.

"Lets just put the herbs by his store. I'm sure he's just somewhere around camp, but you'd better not keep Painted waiting. That cat has issues," Boulderpaw was grumbling again.

"Don't you have issues too?" Scorch snapped. He may be right, but it still annoyed Scorch for her friends to be taking such low jabs at each other. Especially behind the others backs!

"Here, I'll take the herbs, you go meet Painted," Boulderpaw snapped in annoyance, probably at her tone. Their muzzles brushed as he took the herbs from her mouth and she felt their whiskers tickle each other before she left.

Twitching her ears in nervous energy that had arisen from nowhere, she headed back out, nodding briefly at the night sentry that was just getting set into place. Scorch trotted delicately along the snow-covered log that was a long, white bump in a sea of snow. The silence, the dark, the glint of moonlight that reflected in silver beams across the snow, and the frozen air that compressed the world around her. It was beautiful and suffocating and paused all thought in her mind outside of placing her paws in front of the other along the log.

Painted, Jump, and Mira were shivering together at the end of the log, their eyes fixed heavily on her. She sensed anger, guilt, sadness,

reproach, and a tangle of distress from them. That was the heavy atmosphere that had settled on the forest, it hadn't come from the cold, but from her friends.

For a moment, Scorch almost found herself turning away. She knew she could handle not knowing, but the truth was so much heavier than curiosity. *But this isn't like me... I usually can handle anything. Just remember that it'll all work out.*

That had worked with her worries about the Clan, and about Nightwing, and about the traitor. But as she padded ever closer to the impending chasm the sitting cats seemed to create, she felt less and less sure. Scorch didn't even know what they were going to say yet, but was already so sure she didn't want to know and that she'd regret listening.

Then she noticed something, not three cats sat there, but four. She sucked in a breath, *no way...* Her heart started thudding heavily as the atmosphere suddenly made sense, but it was even harder as she forced her paws to keep moving her forward. And the few seconds it had taken to walk over to the cats had seemed to her both too short and too long.

"Well, I'm here," she whispered, looking up at the four cats. Two pairs of green eyes, two pairs of amber eyes. "What did you want to say?"

Painted stood up, "Not here, lets move a little further from the camp," the cream she-cat spoke curtly, even she seemed to be feeling the tense, frozen feeling of the atmosphere. It wasn't the thickening swarm of an impending storm, this feeling was a cracking, brittle one. As if one wrong word would shatter something important to one, or all of them and unleash a torrent of held-back words.

I may be selfish, but I 'm glad that the scars this talk is sure to cause won't be mine. I have enough as it is. Her thoughts flashed to her private store of poppy seeds. This would be the perfect opportunity to tell a cat that she trusted and who cared for her about her problem. The perfect time to put all her fear behind her once and for all.

"Scorch, how old are you?" Jump asked suddenly.

Scorch looked at him, "About six and a half moons, why?"

"No reason, you just seemed bigger than I remembered," Jump smiled and flicked his tail over her ears. Scorch gave a small smile back, relieved that at least one of them wasn't dreading this talk. *I swear, its like we're all marching to our deaths...* Though she was sure it was more because of those three cats glaring spikes at each other more than anything else.

"Yes, she has grown this past moon, hasn't she?" Mira purred, putting on an obvious cheerful facade. "Before, your head didn't even reach my belly, now your ears are at my shoulder," Mira mewed, standing next to her to measure her up.

Scorch laughed, "Well, the last time we stood next together was before your leg got broken, so its been almost three moons since then," she pointed out. A strain of cheerfulness broke the fragile air around them and allowed warmth to come back to Scorch's breath.

She sighed, *well, at least I won't be entering this talk feeling numb. I just hope I can leave that way, I really want to sleep tonight.* "Can you just tell me that you aren't going to say anything bad?" Scorch asked as they settled down near the frozen lake.

"No, because I don't want to lie," Painted growled.

"Although, I'm not sure that anything we say is really going to be that bad for *you*," Raven growled, glaring at Painted and Mira.

"If you're just going to duke out some family drama, do I really need to be here?" Scorch begged. This was what she was dreading, she honestly wanted no part in this and she was neither ashamed nor curious.

"There's more than just that to talk about," Jump sighed, nudging her. He leaned down toward her ear, "Trust me, I don't really want to have to watch this either," he whispered.

Scorch gave a chuckling sigh and resigned herself to this talk that was probably going to end up being neither beneficial nor heart-

warming. Painted stood up to talk first and Scorch immediately wished she was anywhere else.

"Now, Raven, its been a while since we talked last. And since we are now living in close proximity for a while, though it is obviously not of our choice to be anywhere near you..."

And Painted's vain attempt as civility disappeared like a leaf in a storm. Scorch flattened her ears and tried to ignore the flow of insults and their best attempts to hurt each other as ill-thoughts and grievances from moons ago resurfaced in a torrent of searing words.

"You were always acting like you were the leader, Painted, well, seeing where your family ended up you're not a great one!"

"Raven! You were always looking for trouble, if I'd just left you to fend for yourself every time I found in danger that you'd gotten into by yourself, you'd be-"

"Mom was always boasting about Mira and saying, 'well, why don't you try to be more like your sister?'"

"You're just jealous that momma and daddy were proud that I didn't go getting into dangerous fights whenever they turned their back!"

"I can't talk to you when you're like that!"

"I wish we'd never talk to again!"

"I can arrange that!"

"I hate you, Raven! You're so awful"

"I always despised you two, I wish I was the only littermate! Or that I had a brother instead!"

Scorch narrowed her eyes as she watched the unrestrained flow of life-long annoyances put out upon scathing tongues. She felt like she was going to be reeled back by the force of their flurry of emotions that went from sadness, to anger, to smugness, and back to sadness in a heartbeat. "Do all littermates fight like this?" she whispered to Jump who looked like he was enjoying wasting his

night on this as much as she was.

"No, I never fought with my siblings like this. Of course we argued, but not like this," he sighed.

Silence settled between them as they waited for the tide of voices to ebb, but it seemed to keep growing stronger until they were screaming. "Hey, they don't expect us to mediate when they stop talking, right?" Scorch whispered to Jump.

"I hope not," Jump muttered.

"Relax, this is just part of the healing process. Let them get their emotions out, and then they're apologize and it'll be alright," Boulderpaw mewed beside her.

"Yep," Scorch nodded in agreement. Then froze. *Boulderpaw?* She turned her head slowly, not quite understanding as she looked at the gray tom whose blue eyes watched the fighting sisters with immense apathy.

Not quite believing her eyes due to the ringing voices and the exhaustion cloaking her vision, she lifted a paw and poked at Boulderpaw's face to make sure he was real.

"What are you doing?" Boulderpaw growled, turning his face toward her as she continued to poke his cheek even though she knew he was real now.

"Just checking," she mewed miserably. She was fearing that she was going to go crazy before this was over. "Would they notice if we left?" she asked.

"Yes, and they'd be really angry," Jump sighed. He had noticed Boulderpaw when he'd arrived, apparently, since he didn't seem surprised at all.

"Don't worry, they're losing their voices. They'll have no choice but to calm down soon," Boulderpaw yawned.

"You're pretty nonchalant, do you do this with your sister?" Scorch asked.

Boulderpaw snorted, "When I was in ThunderClan, I spoke maybe three words to my sister a day. If we trained or went on patrol together or something. Moonpaw is an unhappy cat who made me unhappy and I stayed away from her as much as possible," Boulderpaw grumbled.

"Well, that's sad. Why didn't you try and cheer her up?" Scorch asked awkwardly, recalling a fuzzy image of Moonpaw attacking her.

"Because nothing I can do will make her happy. Probably only death will appease her," Boulderpaw muttered.

"That's not good, you should-"

"I'm not talking about her anymore, got it?" Boulderpaw growled. Scorch got the message from the hard, angry gleam in his eyes and dropped it. But Boulderpaw was right, only a few minutes later the three sisters were silently staring at each other, exhausted from the constant flow of emotions they'd been emitting.

"So... are we done here?" Scorch tentatively ventured to ask after a few minutes of heavy panting. All three of the littermates looked at her and Scorch wanted to shrink down smaller.

"No!" Painted rasped, "I still need to talk to you about some things."

"Me too," Raven growled harshly.

"Can I go?" Jump asked.

"Yes." Scorch's fur bristled, why did he get to go! But Jump remained anyways, nodding at Mira. *Oh, he'll wait until she leaves anyways, so why bother asking then?* Scorch was getting more then a little annoyed. Listening to arguing was not interesting to her and it put her in a sour mood that mixed with her tired and cold limbs and ended with a miserable feeling.

"Why do you want to be here?" she asked, turning to Boulderpaw.

The gray apprentice yawned, "It was too quiet back at camp without you there. So I'll wait until I know when you're coming back."

Scorch shrugged, deciding not to bother with the others weird thoughts at the moment. "Well, lets please talk now so I can get to sleep before moon-high," Scorch mewed, adding to her point with a yawn.

"But you always loved sneaking out at night," scoffed Painted. The cream she-cat sighed and settled down on the ground. "Fine, I'll settle with you before we get back to it-"

"You mean you're not done?!" Scorch broke in.

"No, we're not done yet," Raven growled, glowering at Painted.

"Anyways," Painted raised her voice over the cats and sent a scathing glare at Raven before turning once again toward Scorch. "I feel I should tell you something for the benefit of your Clan friends, since they are allowing us to stay with them for now," the she-cat sounded awkwardly gracious and her gaze flicked from face to face apologetically, although she refused to look at Raven.

"Can we hurry this up? I'm still tired," Scorch prodded.

"Quit whining! This is *important!"* Painted hissed. Scorch, for her part, stifled her little bit of irritation that had come back and tried her best to listen attentively and patiently. Scorch astounded herself that she was so willing to appease her friend who had only rarely ever shown patience to her at good moments and certainly never late at night.

"While we were leaving, we came across some other rogues. They said they were heading out of the area, and we asked why- since we'd never had any troubles- and they said that a group of cats was moving into the area and scaring or threatening off any other cats in the surrounding area while they planned an attack on the Clans," Painted mewed.

"A group of cats? Are they talking about Nightwing expanding his territory?" Boulderpaw mused. Scorch nodded; that was the first thing that had come to her mind too.

"I don't know for sure, but that's not the feeling I got from them. I

think it was a whole new group of cats moving into place to attack the Clans. I still don't know if they were planning to attack this Nightwing cat, or the Clans in general. But we came back 'cause we didn't want Scorch getting caught up in a power struggle far beyond her responsibilities," Painted growled, glaring at Boulderpaw and Raven.

Scorch frowned, slightly troubled at the idea of another, unforeseen enemy. *But, somehow, I can't believe that a group of rogue would just randomly decide to attack the Clans now. It has to be connected to Nightwing and maybe even the rebellion.* "Were the cats, maybe, from the same place you cats are from? You said Nightwing went there for recruits. It could be connected," Scorch suggested.

Painted shared a glance with Raven, "I don't know, since I never saw this groupdof cats, but I don't think that's likely," Painted mewed.

"Why not?" Boulderpaw asked, stepping beside her.

"Because the cats from the city think differently than Clan cats. We aren't raised to recover lost things or carry on old wounds. We adapt to change whether we like it or not and move on," Raven mewed and all four of the city cats nodded in solemn agreement.

Scorch shared a very long glance with Boulderpaw. She just couldn't bring herself to get sassy now, but it was almost painful to not point out the obvious...

"You say that, but you three sisters have been bickering all night long about an age-old decision, right?" Boulderpaw blurted out and Scorch's whiskers twitched as she looked at the looks of confusion and embarrassment that filtered over the cats' faces.

"Well, uh, that's different," Mira waved her tail lightly, laughing a little as she shared a wry smile with her sisters.

"Back to these mystery cats; I think it would be prudent to take them into account and investigate a little," Painted mewed.

Scorch nodded thoughtfully. "I'll mention it to Sunstar, but... he

hasn't been taking much I've said lately seriously," she mewed quietly, feeling a little unsure about her position.

"I thought you were in charge of this whole thing?" Mira frowned in confusion.

"Well, she was. But Sunstar has the title and power, he's basically the law right now," Boulderpaw grumbled. "He's really working my last nerve," he added in a savage growl that made Scorch flinch.

"Calm down, he's just doing what he thinks is best. And he doesn't think taking all the advice he gets from a kit is the best choice. He's got a reputation to uphold," Raven snorted. She, obviously, didn't hold Sunstar in high esteem.

"But Scorch really has the best ideas. Just yesterday he ignored her advice that he start organizing for the final push to beat Nightwing! I don't know what Sunstar's waiting for, but if we don't strike first, Nightwing will and we'll be fighting a losing fight," Boulderpaw snapped.

"He wants to make sure every cat is in top condition before he launches another attack. You remember what happened last time we attacked," Scorch defended Sunstar softly.

"I know, I know. But, the season is just getting colder and sickness will be a more dangerous enemy than Nightwing in not too long. We need to be settled before next moon or we won't make it to new-leaf," Boulderpaw clawed at the snow, blue eyes wide and his black pupils pulsing larger.

"You're right, and Sunstar's not a complete idiot. He'll launch the offensive soon," Raven mewed gravely, her amber eyed set in determination.

Scorch looked up at the cats after a moment of solemn silence. She wore a bright grin, "So you three came all the way back just because you were a little worried about me?"

Mira laughed and nodded while Jump looked away, shifting his paws awkwardly. Painted jumped to her paws, looking indignant.

"If you must know, I just wanted to make sure that you didn't die too easily. Since I saved your life and all, I couldn't have all that work be for nothing- now could I?" Painted nodded to herself seriously, but she winked an eye at Scorch.

Scorch's tail quivered with appreciation. feeling the relief of warmth fill her after the harsh words and cold air had chilled her. "Well, these cats are going to be a problem, but hopefully it'll be nothing serious and will hold off until we beat the living-daylights out of Nightwing," Raven yawned.

"Yes... And I suppose I should say that Mira and Jump want to stay here with Scorch until everything is settled. So I don't think I have much choice but to stay and help either. Talk to Sunstar about it, would you?" Painted asked Raven with a glare.

"Sorry, I'm not in any-cat's good graces here. I used to be on the enemy side until I got tired of it," Raven apologized with a very cheeky grin.

"Gosh, you're useless! And does that mean you once fought Scorch when we weren't here?" Painted bickered.

"I did attack you a few moons ago when you first arrived," Raven reminded her.

"That's right! You never apologized for your friend who broke Mira's leg!" Painted snapped.

"Calm down, I plagued him with pranks for a whole moon. By the end he was so scared he couldn't go anywhere alone," Raven smiled in self-satisfaction and the sisters purred in amusement.

"They sure change attitudes quickly," Boulderpaw grumbled in her ear.

"I think its cute, they're like the real kits here. Dangerous kits," Scorch giggled back in his ear.

"Anyways, I think we should make a truce until this Nightwing fellow is beat down," Painted mewed to Raven. "No more fighting about this until the end, when its over, we can sit down and have a

crack at each other and work this mess out. Sound good?" Painted and Mira offered the proposition to Raven.

"Well..." Raven looked unconvinced and suspicious, but than she looked into Painted's eyes and smiled. "Alright, a truce just like the old days. No poking until the time comes. And Scorch," Raven looked at her. "I'll wait until this is over before I sit you down too," the black cat mewed.

Scorch didn't really understand and shrugged at Boulderpaw's questioning look. "Well, its time for kits to get to bed. The moon is up and its super cold, back to camp, Scorch!" Mira broke the silence and she and Jump started to herd her and Boulderpaw back toward camp while Raven and Painted remained seated by the lake.

Scorch and Boulderpaw nodded and started off back toward camp with a comfortable silence between them, but Scorch's belly still felt unsettled. The lines, every line, was becoming blurry. The lines of siblings, of right and wrong, of enemies, of friends, of life and death; it was all blurring on a dizzying backdrop of snow and a smoky shadow of mystery. *I still just wonder... is it possible that he has anything to do with this?*

...

Raven and Painted sat in silence as they watched the four cats melt into the silver and black shadows. "Well?" Painted asked, turning her green eyes on the black she-cat.

"Well, what?" Raven responded, looking at the discolored mirror of herself.

"I saw you blink when I mentioned the cats. Honestly, I'm surprised Scorch missed it. But you know something, don't you? You said yourself you used to be on the other side, that gives you an edge on this kind of stuff," Painted mewed.

Raven looked up at the pine trees, their underside was blackened in the shadows but the snow still glittered gray in the slight gleam of moonshine. She took a deep sigh as Painted continued watching her, "You always knew that staring at me for a long time annoyed

me the most," she grumbled. "Yes, I have an idea of sorts," Raven admitted.

"Please, do share. And make sure your tell Scorch so that she won't kill herself," Painted snapped.

"Scorch is fine on her own. You don't give her enough credit," Raven snapped back.

"She's just a kit!" Painted protested.

"She's a warrior!" Raven roared. "You don't see her as she is. To you, she's just a kit that's struggling to do what she thinks is right. I see a kit that carries the entire Clan on her skinny shoulders and hates it. She doesn't do it because she wants to, she does it because she has to, and she doesn't shirk her duty," Raven growled.

Painted stared at her with slightly wider eyes, "How is any of this her *duty."*

Raven huffed, "I can't tell you. But she is the whole fighting spirit of this whether or not she's calling the shots, this rebellion wouldn't have lasted one battle without her. These cats don't know her, but they still place all their hopes in her even if they don't quite realize it and if she's gone, they're done," Raven growled. *What's worrying is that every cat in NightClan can see it too,* she added to herself silently.

Painted was quiet and stared at her paws and the wind gently shook the branches above them, sending shivers of snow falling around them. "Maybe I don't give Scorch the credit she really deserves," she admitted. "I know that what she's done at such a young age is marvelous and I knew she has a special... ambiance about her, ever since I first met her half-drowned and carefree... But she still is just a kit, she shouldn't have to trade away innocence for battle scars," Painted sounded chocked and when Raven looked in surprised, tears were welling in her green eyes.

Raven looked at her own paws now, embarrassed at seeing her strong sister's tears. "I don't think she is. She doesn't have any innocence to trade away. I can't explain it... but I know that she's seen and experienced far more than her few moons and physical

knowledge allow. She's special, not just in this world, but she's special far beyond what we can see. She's almost... She just seems... what she knows is... She's-"

The two sisters stared at each other, amber eyes meeting green as their two minds focused on the red and black patched kit with the drowning dark green eyes. "Timeless," they mewed in unison. The word was snatched by the wind and carried over branches and across icicles before vibrating in the very fabric of the sky. And it seemed the stars glittered a little brighter that night.

Chapter 31: Friend or Foe?

Chapter 31: Friend Or Foe?

"Alright; Painted, Jump, and Mira may stay and help. But they must agree to follow the orders they're given. If they don't, we'll have to have them leave," Sunstar agreed gruffly. Scorch dipped her head in gracious thanks and with a sigh of relief in her breath. Sunstar hadn't been very willing to take in more strangers for a number of reasons that he vaguely hinted at, but she'd won her friends a spot in the Clan for the time being.

"Now, Scorch, you'll be directly responsible for them, right?" Sunstar asked, a glint in his orange eyes.

Scorch shuffled her paws, not liking the tone in his voice. As if he were trying to get her to slip up... "Yes, of course. I trust them not to do anything terrible, although I won't be responsible for Painted's tongue," Scorch added quickly.

Sunstar's whisker's twitched and he stretched lazily in the weak morning sunlight. Going to him to get the OK for Painted's, Jump's, and Mira's allowance into the Clan, had been the first thing Scorch had done when she'd gotten up the morning after the late night excursion.

"Well, go help Flickertail with the herbs," Sunstar ordered as she turned away.

"Hmm? Why?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder at him curiously.

"There's a planned attack today, I just sent out the orders. If all goes well, we can beat Nightwing before dusk," Sunstar purred as if the fighting were already done.

"What about those mystery cats I just told you about?" Scorch asked, frowning. She would have gotten a hold on the situation

before acting.

"Oh, I'm sure there's little chance that they'll be of any trouble," Sunstar brushed it off and Scorch's tail twitched as she realized he wasn't taking that threat seriously.

"When do we leave?" Scorch asked.

"We? There is no 'we,' you will stay here. It's too dangerous to bring a kit into battle no matter what you say, especially with an injury," Sunstar's tail tapped her cobweb-wrapped head.

"I've fought before! And I'm not a kit, I'm the age of an apprentice!" Scorch argued, feeling miserably overlooked.

"And you've been seriously injured and almost killed several times. You're still very small and young, not to mention you haven't had the same training a regular Clan apprentice would get. As far as I'm concerned, you're still a kit," Sunstar mewed calmly, confident in knowing his words were spoken law to all the Clan cats.

Scorch chewed on her tongue, indecisive on whether to continue this fight or not. *If I don't go, then its all out of my control. If I'm there, even on the sidelines, I can help*. "How about I just stay with Flickertail and help with the wounded?" she suggested.

But Sunstar shook his wide head, "No."

"Why not?!" Scorch almost whined.

"Because I don't trust you to stay out of the fighting," Sunstar growled warningly, narrowing his eyes down at her. Scorch's heart jumped a little. He didn't *trust* her? It turned her blood to ice. Fear and self-reproach swept her, *what did I do to make him stop trusting me?* She racked her conscious, but couldn't find an instance in which she'd earned herself distrust from him.

"Now, if you excuse me, I have a battle to organize," Sunstar mewed, striding past her and leaving her alone in his den, shivering slightly as she continued to frown and desperately try to remember what she'd done wrong.

...

The lines are so blurred. Scorch scratched her claws through the snow, leaving three long furrows in which she stared at remorsefully. The camp was hushed in silence and she was full of jittery bugs as she anxiously flexed her claws through the snow.

I wonder how the battle is going... The cats had just left, so they may not have even started fighting yet, but she was stuck at camp alone doing nothing. And saying she was alone was not far from the truth. The only cat that had remained behind with her was Mira, because of her broken leg.

I hope it all goes well, I hope they beat Nightwing, I hope there's no trouble or casualties, I wish... I could be there. It was ironically sad to think that she would be stuck in a camp twiddling her paws while the rebellion she had started-through her own sheer determination-would be finished without her.

Well, if it is finished, it'll be a blessing. The cats are tired and battle-worn, they need a safe place for the rest of the cold season. Her thoughts wandered to Boulderpaw and how he was doing in the fight. *He's a good fighter, and too smart to take on an opponent he has no hope of beating. It's against his very nature to fight a losing fight, I bet that's why it was so hard for him to be a part of this.*

Scorch yawned and jumped to her paws, banishing the meaningless thoughts. The noonday sun had been covered by just enough clouds to make the snow gray in the dim light. Everything was gray; the shadows, the snow that covered everything, and the sky. She knew that even if she went to the lake the ice would be gray there as well.

But its not a bad color, its the same color as Boulderpaw's fur... She jumped as she realized where her thoughts had led. *You're such a weirdo*, she chastised herself and swept those thoughts from her mind along with the others as she glanced over to where Mira was stretching her broken leg.

Sighing, she lifted her head, startle by something. Then she realized it was silence that she'd heard; that crushing, unobstructed,

voiceless song laid heavily over the camp. She couldn't hear a single living thing, even her breaths sounded nonexistent.

I've got to do something or I'm going to go insane! Scorch got to her paws and trotted through the snow toward Mira. "Can we do something?" she begged, looking up at the amber-eyed gray tabby.

"Well, we're supposed to stay here until the cats return and then help where needed. But... this waiting is dreadfully boring, isn't it?" Mira gave her a sympathetic look but looked unwilling to do anything else.

"Why don't we go investigate those mystery cats!" Scorch suggested, finding that to be the most pressing- and possible- thing to do.

"I think it would be very foolish to go with no cat here to back us up if we needed it," Mira scolded with a disapproving frown.

"But we won't go right up to their camp. I mean, we should just go and find out where their territory is. We'll stop as soon as we find the scent marks," Scorch suggested. "Just something to keep us busy," she pleaded when she saw Mira was mostly unconvinced.

"Well..." Mira looked around the frozen camp and then back down at Scorch's wide, begging eyes. "I guess just a little look will be alright... We just have to make it quick so that we're back before the warriors are, okay?" Mira decided.

"Yeah!" Scorch cheered in relief, the air vibrating with the echo of her voice. She turned and quickly led Mira out of the camp, bouncing along the white log and jumping off the end into a snow drift. The snow in the drift went up to her shoulders and she laughed as she hopped forward until she out of it, blissfully joyous to be doing something besides worrying.

"Oh, Scorch!" Mira laughed, amber eyes twinkling. "You look like you were attacked by the snow!"

"I don't know why that would be, when it was I who attacked the snow," Scorch answered in mock indignation.

Mira chuckled and flicked her tail over Scorch's ears as she started

off in the direction of RiverClan territory. Scorch raced to her side as she got left behind and walked quickly to keep up with Mira's slow, but still longer, strides.

"Hmm. Its so quiet today, everything's still asleep, even the sky never woke up," Scorch mewed, glancing up at the thickly covered sky. The brief break of sunlight that morning had been covered quickly by the surrounding clouds that had started moving in the night before.

"I know, but the lack of wind is nice," Mira mewed, peering up at the motionless pines.

"Definitely, it feels so much less unbearable when there's no wind to blow the cold through to your skin. Fur is more effective in the cold season when there's no wind; if its even the teeniest breezy, the fur becomes completely pointless," Scorch sighed as she shivered just remembering the cold wind she'd experienced in her short life.

"Yeah, when we lived out by the ocean it was always windy but it never really got super cold; there was always a warm, moist feeling to it," Mira mewed, just a bit of longing evident in her voice.

Scorch felt bad for a moment- guilty that she'd taken her friends from their peaceful home and sad that she'd been taken away from her home as well. *But its not all bad... I've gotten to go on this adventure and...* "We'll all go back someday together. This time next year this will all be a memory," Scorch mewed optimistically.

"I hope so, but I don't know how I'll feel about it," Mira mewed thoughtfully.

"Why? I mean, I don't know either... but I thought that's just because I'm so young," Scorch mewed.

"No, it doesn't really change with age. You never know how you're going to feel looking back until its all over," Mira looked down at her and laughed sheepishly. "No matter how hard you try, you're never prepared for what life gives you."

Scorch snorted, "I wonder why no cat is used to it then," she mused,

looking past the barren shadowed snow-land and into oblivion.

"I know what you mean, but no cat is ever prepared for something until after its happened and then the same thing never happens the same way twice to the same cat, so then its pretty useless to prepare and you never get used to it," Mira gave a small smile. "But for some things in life, its okay to not be prepared. You just got to love what comes your way and live your life with it," Mira smiled and for a moment she sounded perfectly blissful.

Scorch looked at her, a thought flashing in her mind as she stared, dumbfounded, at the she-cat. *Oh~* Scorch giggled to herself as she sneaked quick flash glances at the gray tabby she-cat who was busy testing the air warily. *Now I know another reason why they didn't want to travel a far distance and are willing to fight for peace and safety.*

"Is there something wrong?" Mira asked, amber eyes concerned and unsuspecting.

"Oh, no, I"m just fine. What about you? A little tired, maybe hungry?" Scorch hinted. Mira gave her usual, naive look to her. *Its sometimes hard to believe I'm the kit with her.*

"No, I'm just fine. We're not far from where the cats are said to be," Mira mewed, striding ahead. Perhaps she was a little more brisk this moment.

Scorch raced after her, scrambling over snowdrifts and panting as she clawed her way over a slippery fallen log. But she wasn't worried about losing concentration of what was around her, the pine boughs were higher here and the shadows were lighter- allowing them to see a good ways around them.

"We're almost to the edge of the territory," Scorch huffed as she scrambled back to Mira's side.

"Yes, they're supposed to be just past the border. Not quite close enough for their scent to be super evident to us in our territory, but close enough to keep an eye on us," Mira mewed.

"Did you pass them when you came back?" Scorch asked.

"No... but we did smell them," Mira mewed.

"And what did they smell like?" Scorch asked, ears pricked in interest.

Mira paused as they went around a stray holly bush that had kept its glossy green leaves under the snow. "I don't know... Their scent was like... something I'd never smelled before. Though it did remind me of some moor tops we passed before by the ocean, but less salty," Mira frowned in confusion.

"Oh, I know what you're talking about," Scorch mewed, remembering the scanty moor that had stretched away from the clifftop where she'd been born. She had only seen it once, but the spotty grass and hard sand had stuck in her mind. "I don't know why cats from *there* would be *here*..." Scorch stopped short- her heart thudding, blood pounding.

"Are you okay?" Mira asked as she paused a few steps ahead.

"Fine, fine," Scorch muttered as she picked up her paws in feverish energy. A thought, a hope, had sparked in her mind and her pulse thumped wildly as her breath came in gasping breaths even though she'd only just barely picked up her pace.

"Lets just hurry," Scorch urged, desperately anxious to see these mystery cats. *Don't get your hopes up, its a thousand to one chance that its them. Don't dream too much, just focus*, she scolded herself in her head, but she didn't stop wishing. And the more she wished and hoped for it, the more she was convinced it was true.

I wouldn't put it past them to come all this way for me... And they're not always the nicest cats, so its no surprise they're scaring cats off... "Slow down, Scorch!" Mira called her from behind, having been left behind as Scorch picked up the pace. But the young red and black ignored her and just went faster. *If they're here, if they're hear*, Scorch's pants came faster, *If my parents are here then...*

"Then what?" Scorch jumped as the voice whispered through her

ears, it was like when Song spoke to her, but this voice was different. She spun around on her tail, eyes seeking and ears straining. *Then... what?'What?' I get to see my parents again! I miss them so much!* Scorch's throat choked and her eyes watered with want. *No! No crying now, not when they're so close...*

Scorch leaped forward on the path again but was bowled over before her paws even touched the ground again. She grunted and struggled frantically against the weight on her as she was pushed under a bush and her muzzle shoved into the snow. *Wait!*

"Shh, Scorch!" Mira's voice begged intensely in a whisper. Scorch froze, lifting her now released head to draw in a few breaths. It took a moment to realize what was going on, but then her ears burned with shame.

They were already in the RiverClan territory and a group of strange cats were passing dangerously close to where they were. In her frenzy of thoughts and emotions she hadn't been paying attention at all to her surroundings.

"I thought I heard something," a cat growled.

"I thought I did too, but I don't see anything..." another cat answered.

"But, look! There are paw-prints here in the snow!"

"I don't *smell* anything. And they're so scattered, it could have been a retreating cat," a new, young, speculative voice piped up.

"It could have bee a fox from the looks of it, a cat is usually neater then that unless they're running in haste," the growling voice admitted.

"But its weird that it stops suddenly, foxes can't climb trees."

"Maybe the wind swept the prints away?" the young voice suggested.

"Unlikely, the trees block out most of the wind and there isn't a breath right now. Besides, these are too fresh and it isn't even

hardly snowing."

"Do we want to follow them?" the young voice asked excitedly.

"I don't think so, they head to Clan territory. We don't want to mess with them, yet," the voice decided and a murmur of agreement went up. "Lets go back to camp and report it," the cats turned and left.

This is my chance! Scorch wriggled out of Mira's grasp and ignored her whisper of protest as she started tailing the group of cats, swooping from shadow to shadow like a bird until they were within eyesight. There were two full grown cats, a lengthy brown tom with yellow eyes and a younger gray tom with blue eyes. Scorch couldn't see the other cat in the patrol, though she was certain there had been three voices.

Who are these cats? I'm sure my parents wouldn't be involved in something like this... But that doesn't mean they're not here! She thought stubbornly. *Now, I just need to follow them quickly, find there camp, and get back home before the cats return from battle.*

For a moment, Scorch felt guilty that she was out here adventuring while her Clan-mates were risking their lives. *But this is important too! Very, very important...* She started to creep forward now that the cats were out of sight again.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Scorch jumped three tail-lengths in the air. Her fur stood on their ends in shock and fear. She spun in midair and landed facing the master of the voice. It took half a heartbeat to realize it was the same young voice that had been in the group she'd just been trailing.

Scorch stood, open-mouthed, as she looked at this cat, not knowing what to say or do. It was a young cat as she'd guessed, no older than she was and no bigger. In fact, they seemed to be the exact size. This cat had red fur with three molted white patches- one which covered her left eye- and incredibly light green eyes; like ice reflecting green light.

That cat's body structure was much like Scorch's; a round head,

small paws, slender legs, and slight body length. Almost disturbingly, it was almost exact except that this kit had tufts of fur on her ears and looked longer-furred and fluffier than Scorch was.

"I... I'm... uh, I'm," Scorch stuttered.

"You're following us back to camp?" the cat laughed, a twinkle in her eyes and a playful grin on her face. "You're not very good at sneaking! The red gives you away," the other kit flicked her tail at her pelt.

"Well, yours gives you away too!" Scorch protested, the kit's red fur was a shade lighter than hers and burned like fire against the snow.

"But you didn't spot me until I was right behind you. So that means I'm better at sneaking," the kit mewed. "Well, I usually would have sensed you, but I... I was thinking about something," Scorch's face burned as she realized she'd once again let herself get so caught up in thoughts about her parents that she'd completely blanked out.

"Oh? Would you like to try again?" the kit offered sweetly.

Scorch backed away slowly, feeling odd sensations flow and ebb from this kit. It unnerved her and made her feel strangely weak. "Why are you backing away? Its okay, you don't have to try again. I'm sorry if I startled you, please don't go!" the kit's tone was concerned, but the smile never left her muzzle and her eyes seemed to gloss over as she continued to step forward as Scorch stepped back.

This cat... this kit... something is... not right with her. "Who are you?" Scorch asked in a wavering voice.

"Who am I?" the kit tilted her head. "But you are in my territory? Shouldn't I be asking you that?" the cat stepped closer and Scorch took another step back, her heart thumping loudly again. But this time it was from fear rather than excitement as chills overtook her at the rhythm of the kit's voice.

"I asked first," Scorch mumbled, eyes locked with the other cat's eyes. *I sense nothing from her, its as if she's nonexistent... But she's not*

a mirage, what is she?!

The cat stepped closer and Scorch took another step back, gasping as she tripped over some roots and landed on her rump, hastily scooting herself backward as the cat approached faster. Scorch noticed that her eyes hadn't blinked once and that her scent was invisible to the nose. *Is she even alive?* That was a silly question. But at the moment- faced with this strange, smiling kit- it didn't seem impossible to Scorch.

The kit was looming over her now, snowflakes dancing around her ginger fur. Her three white patches glowing like the moon at night. "Your name is Scorch," the kit announced.

Scorch swallowed hard, paws shaking and a cold sweat broke out over her. The kit grinned wider, "Now, you guess my name," the kit encouraged, leaning her face down toward her so that their whiskers touched.

Scorch felt her eyes widen, her mind spaced as if she were looking down a long dark corridor with a light at the end. *No! What's going on?!* She fought the urge to enter the dark corridor in her mind. "I don't know your name!" she gasped, fighting the urgent pull of her thoughts.

"Yes, you do. Stop fighting it!" the kit encouraged her with the same sunny tone in her voice. The kit touched her nose to Scorch's, their eyes had no more than a feather's shin width between them. Scorch looked into them, and she understood. And then she forgot, but it was long enough to find what she was looking for.

"Your name is... Sonya," Scorch breathed.

The kit cheered, jumping back and dancing through the snow. Clumps of snow were thrown up around her as Sonya whirled around in a fury. "Scorch!" Sonya turned toward her, breathless and with the wide grin still on her face. "I can't wait to see what we do together!" And then the kit was dashing off, a streak of red against the white snow.

Scorch got up and stumbled to watch her go. Just at the horizon,

Sonya turned and looked back to. Their eyes locked again and stars shot from one end to the other. "*I'll be seeing you again*!" Scorch listened and heard it.

I'll be waiting, she answered in her thoughts.

Then the kit disappeared and Scorch was left in turbulent confusion. *Who was that cat? Is she a friend or an enemy? I don't remember... but her name was... it was... ah, yes, it was Sonya*. She muttered to herself, her mind feeling jumbled until she didn't even know what she was thinking anymore. All she remembered was a kit and her name. Sonya... Did that kit ever tell her the name? Or did she just know? *But... that's impossible, isn't it?*

Scorch felt a shiver go down her spine, but she remained motionless. *That kit was different... a scary different, but was she a friend of an enemy? I don't know*. Feeling incredibly unsettled, she paced around in a tight circle under a pine tree, trying through sheer will power to remember everything she could about Sonya.

But it was like chasing after the broken fragments of a dream once you'd awoken. You remember some parts, and forget others; even if you recall them happening along with the emotions you'd felt. Scorch managed to grasp some parts, but missed others. *I remember what she looked like, but not what she sounded like. I remember her knowing my name, but I don't remember if she told me her name or if I knew it. I remember something weird happening when she left, but I don't know what it was...*

"Scorch!" She jumped at Mira's hissing whisper and her heart beat even more heavily, so heavily it was frightening.

"Don't scare me like that!" Scorch snapped before she could recover her fraying calm.

Mira took a step back, eyes wide with shock. Scorch had never snapped at her before no matter what. In fact, Scorch only snapped when she was being snapped at under extreme pressure. "Are you okay?" Mira asked in a small voice.

Scorch shook her head, "Yes, yes, I'm just fine. But... I need to think,

I need to-" Scorch heaved in breaths as she continued pacing, looking at the blurry gray snow beneath her paws but seeing ice green eyes and a perfect smile. She jumped, trembling. That smile... It... was not something she could describe, but it brought back a memory.

I couldn't sense anything from her. And it wasn't like her emotions were well hid, it was like I couldn't feel her at all. Why couldn't I? I've always been able to feel other cats, even Song. It tells me they're alive, like the warmth of a breath. Feeling more scared now, Scorch paused and ran her spirit deep into the earth so that her mirages would appear.

She felt a rush of relief as she opened her eyes and everything was surreal as she watched the ghostly mirages around her weave and flow to their own past lives. *My power still works...* Scorch breathed a sigh of relief and opened her eyes again, blinking open her eyes at Mira.

"I'm okay now," she whispered, her spirit settled and mind clear.

Mira nodded slowly, her amber eyes wide. "Scorch... your eyes... they just turned a different color," the she-cat mewed shakily and looked startled out of her mind.

"What do you mean?" Scorch's heart jumped. *Was it because of my power? Wait... no, it couldn't be.* "What color did they turn?" she asked, almost scared to hear the answer.

"It was like a... Crystal green... nothing I'd ever seen," Mira's voice sounded dazed and the tabby she-cat looked about ready to be overwhelmed.

"An ice green?" Scorch asked in an echoing voice and her heart dropped when Mira nodded. Scorch trembled for a moment, feeling weak and ready to collapse for just half a second as she looked at the horizon that Sonya had disappeared to. "*Who are you*?" she asked through her mind.

The answer giggled back to her mind; "*Patience, you'll find out soon enough my darling, Scorch*."

Chapter 32: Time of Night

Time Of Night

"So, after all that you never even made it to the camp?" Boulderpaw snorted as Scorch finished recounting the occurrences in the 'expedition' she'd had with Mira earlier that day.

"Well... no," Scorch admitted, patching his cut shoulders with herbs. "But that wasn't the point!" she snapped.

"Well, then, what was it?!" Boulderpaw snapped back, equally annoyed.

"That kit..." Scorch murmured, dropping her voice abruptly. "Lay down, I can't get a good angle from here," she ordered, back in command. Boulderpaw grumbled a bit as he laid on his stomach and she gingerly climbed on his back to carefully clean the wound in between his shoulder blades.

The sun was setting behind the overcast sky and all the cats from the battle had returned not long after Mira had escorted her home from RiverClan territory. She'd been too focused on healing cats to really get the details of the fight, but she knew from Flickertail that every cat was accounted for. *That's a relief at least...*

"Hey, Scorch?" she looked up as an orange tom stopped by her, since she was operating outside the medicine-cat den to give Flickertail more room with the more serious wounded.

"Yes, Cedarheart?" she asked, looking up into his cloudy blue eyes.

"Willowwater... will she be okay?"

Scorch bit on her lip. "Of course she'll be fine! Her wounds were serious, but not fatal!" she forced cheerfulness. The silver and black tabby was most definitely in the worst shape of all the cats, but she'd been treated and was expected to survive. Of course that

didn't guarantee anything, especially in the cold season.

"Yeah, but if she gets an infection she's a gone- ow!" Boulderpaw jumped beneath her as she whacked him across the head.

"That won't happen!" she reassured the doubtful tom with a confident smile. "We've gathered lots of herbs lately, she'll pull through just fine! It just may take a little longer than usual," Scorch mewed. *I doubt she'll do much more than sleeping and eating for half a moon.* But she kept that to herself as she waved Cedarheart on and returned to Boulderpaw's wounds.

"Are you almost done? You're squishing the life out of me! You're so heavy- hey! Ouch, that hurts! Stop it!" Boulderpaw complained as she rubbed in the stinging healing herb juice in a little rougher than was necessary.

"I'm sorry, did I hear you say something?" Scorch asked in one of her tones that clearly relayed it was time to be quiet.

"No..." Boulderpaw murmured and she finished binding his wounds in silence.

"There! All done!" Scorch huffed. Flickertail had finished the rest of the cats with Mira's help so now she was free. "Go find us a spot and I'll grab some prey. Sound good?" she turned to Boulderpaw as he got back to his paws.

"Yeah... but Scorch, that kit you told me about. You didn't tell me everything, did you?" His blue eyes were serious now.

"No, I didn't. And honestly, I don't want tom," she had only told him that she had given off a weird feeling.
"But there is one more thing I'd like to talk to you about..." Scorch dropped her voice. "Though, not in camp. Out in the forest. Later tonight."

Boulderpaw didn't look ecstatic at the thought of a late night discussion again, but he nodded wearily and lumbered over to an empty space by the leader's den. Scorch turned toward the fresh-kill pile and scanned the few scanty pieces worriedly. *Boulderpaw can*

have a mouse. But I ate last night, I'll be fine for a little longer. Besides, its not like I fought or went hunting. All I did was mess around...

Snatching one of the few remaining pieces, she headed over to Boulderpaw and dropped it at his paws. "What about yours?" he asked, ignoring the prey in front of him.

Scorch paused for half a moment, she had the choice of taking the meal of a warrior that had fought in a fierce battle that day, or lie to Boulderpaw. "I ate before, I didn't think I'd have time when the cats returned. I'll be fine until morning," she mewed and sat down opposite of him.

He looked unconvinced as he regarded her through his narrowed blue eyes. But finally he shrugged and turned to his mouse, "Your problem, I guess." Scorch waited in content silence for him to finish his meal.

"So, what happened in the battle today?" she asked eagerly.

"What? You didn't hear the story from the rest of the warriors?" he snorted.

"No."

"Why couldn't you have asked Painted or Flickertail or some cat, instead of bothering me?"

"Cause I wanted to ask you," she huffed, pouting ever so slightly.

"Fine, fine, don't get all huffy with me!" Boulderpaw scowled. "There's not really much to tell about the battle. There was no real winner and no real loser; we couldn't gain ground on either force so when we pulled back, so did Nightwing and we all returned home. Also, no cat lost their life on either side. It was a waste of energy and herbs if you want my opinion."

"Oh." Scorch was silent for a moment. Without actually being there she didn't know what to think. "Hey, did you notice Amelia, by any chance?" she whispered, remembering that not many other cats knew the black murderess was still alive.

Boulderpaw dropped his head toward her. "No... actually, but I noticed through the whole battle that Nightwing looked like he was looking for something."

Looking for something? Scorch wondered. "*Or looking for some cat*?" Scorch jumped at the voice that spoke to her mind, sending up flickers of memories she couldn't quite catch.

She looked around, but didn't see anything and invisible shivers went up and down her spine. "What is it?" Boulderpaw asked, not missing the flash in her eyes.

"Nothing, I just thought I heard something... but I don't see anything. I must have imagined it," Scorch murmured, knowing full well that she had not imagined that voice.

Boulderpaw shrugged. "I didn't hear anything. By the way, about that kit..."

Scorch looked at him; eyes blank as her mind worked. She nodded slowly, "That's it." She got up abruptly and shot off like a dart out of the camp and through the forest without another word. She was single-minded and focused on her destination. You, are you there?

She had to wait only a second. *"Yes, I am here, Scorch."*

Your name is Sonya, but how do I know that?

"Patience, answers come in time to those they belong to. And if they don't, than it is not meant for you to know."

I am not speaking, yet you can hear me?

"I am not speaking either."

How do you do that? Scorch stopped and bit her tongue in fearful frustration.

"I can not answer that anymore than your last question."

Can't? Or won't? Scorch started moving again, frowning as she waited for the answer.

A light, laughing voice answered. *"Both? I suppose. I see... you are coming to me. I will be with you soon."*

Scorch's focus was broken as she sensed she was being followed. She quickly circled around and waited in the thick shadows. Boulderpaw appeared mere moments later, head held high and eyes worried. "Scorch?" he called out to her but she remained silent. No matter what, no other cat was to become entangled in whatever she'd just found herself in.

Boulderpaw continued to call, but his summons likewise continued to remain unanswered as he started searching around. Scorch took his added distraction and sneaked away out of ShadowClan territory. The RiverClan border was close and she darted like a dark bullet across the empty expanse of whiteness. *There, I'm safe*. She peeked back at the pine forest but it didn't appear that Boulderpaw had noticed.

"*You were always safe,"* Sonya's voice laughed at her.

I know that. But I don't want him to be getting involved. Scorch answered in her thoughts stubbornly.

"I suppose I can respect that, Scorch.. I'll be seeing you soon, don't go anywhere."

Scorch sat and waited, taking in her surroundings like she hadn't before. RiverClan territory was far different from ShadowClan, only a few pine trees mingled with the small, frosted shrubbery and snow-covered boulders. Back behind her, the border laid as an empty stretch of nothingness where the pine forests were cut off abruptly as if a monster had plucked each tree from the ground. By the lake, a small outcropping stood a little ways out over the frozen lake and caught her attention for a moment. *Have I seen that before?* It felt almost homely, like a landmark close to home...

Scorch's eyes swept along the lake shore and she spotted a strange looking tree that gave her a curious start. It had bone-white limbs that swayed and almost touched the ground with their ridiculous length. They reminded her of spider's legs and she shivered.

"They are called willows," Scorch looked up at the laugh. She hadn't sensed the presence of another cat and she looked without knowing what to expect. But the moment she saw Sonya, all her memories flowed back with crystalline clearness.

She remembered the words exchanged, the emotions felt, the intensity left from their last meeting... *Sonya*...

"It is good to see you again, Scorch. I'm sorry that I scared you earlier today, it must have been shocking," Sonya purred with the same silky lilt that had seemed to stain Scorch's ears. How could she have forgotten? The glittering eyes, the placate smile, the strange sensation of feelings. Or more so- it was lack of feeling.

"How did you find me?" Scorch asked, padding toward Sonya. The pale moonlight glinted off her white patches and made them shine brilliantly in the night. They almost seemed to glow. Scorch would have believed that anyways.

"When will you learn? I cannot answer all your questions. If it is time for you to know, I will tell you. If not, be patient." Sonya mewed softly as she walked closer.

"Can you tell me why you know me? And why you feel so... strange?" Scorch asked with a wobbly voice, feeling herself become entranced by those limitless pale green eyes. Like green crystals that were as white as moonlight and had the depth of lush moss.

"No, I can't," Sonya breathed, her own eyes became cloudy and suggested she was feeling entranced as well as they stared each other in the eye.

"Are you from here?" Scorch crept closer.

"No, I was called here."

"Away from your family?" Scorch felt a pang, she missed her own family so much. She couldn't imagine leaving by choice.

"No... I was called to my family," Sonya came closer until they were nose-to-nose. "I was called to you."

"Me?" shock had a hard time getting to Scorch in her condition, but it still was a worrying feeling.

"Yes... you see, we are alike. But you are the superior, while I am the lesser. It is my duty and honor to do whatever you wish me to do," Sonya's bright eyes shone genuinely and trust radiated from her expression even in the night shadows.

"I don't understand..." Scorch started pulling back, feeling like she was leaning over an edge she didn't want to fall into.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm just being silly," Sonya pulled back and broke the trance as she twirled around delicately with her her ginger tail pluming out.

Scorch watched her for a moment, at a loss for what to say or do. Luckily, Sonya seemed to notice. "Did you want to do something? Maybe finish what you came here to do earlier?" the white and red she-kit suggested.

Scorch shifted her paws. She had no reason to trust this cat. Actually, considering Sonya was a part of this mystery group, there was more reason to distrust her. Nonetheless, the glow from the cat seemed almost familiar to Scorch and she found herself able to put just a little confidence in Sonya.

"Okay, would it be okay to see your camp?" Scorch asked tentatively.

"Of course! I'll take you there now!" Sonya purred, starting to trot off.

"Wait!" Scorch called worriedly. "We can't be seen!" She didn't want to get on the bad side of any cat tonight.

"Oh... right," Sonya stopped and turned, a serious gleam had joined the excited one in her eyes. "I have an idea, but you'll need to put your trust in me. Even for just half a second."

Scorch hesitated before nodding, regarding the kit warily. As Sonya turned and headed back toward the RiverClan and ShadowClan border, Scorch followed slowly. Sonya went straight for the

outcropping over the water and paused beside it, looking back at her and indicating with her tail for her to follow her.

Then Sonya just disappeared. Scorch's breath caught in her throat as she bounded across the pristine snow. "Sonya?" she gasped, but now she could see the playful gleam of pale green eyes from under the stretch of what seemed to be wooden land.

"Its a dock, and will suffice as a place of protection. Come on in, its okay," Sonya coaxed. Scorch climbed though the wooden bars and into the cave it made that stretched out to the lake. Sonya had laid down and Scorch laid down opposite of her.

"This is the hard part, just give me your paw," Sonya stretched out her white patched paw toward her and Scorch put her own black one on it. "Good, now close your eyes and focus all your life energy on my voice..."

Scorch closed her eyes and relaxed, focusing intently on the swaying motions of the world like she did when she used her powers to see mirages. She focused her energy down to the words Sonya was chanting. "*мимо, будущее, вecотевечныйис and чезать*."

The words hallowed in Scorch's soul as she listened to them. They were strange and indecipherable but gentle and had a note to them that reminded her of someone... someone close. For a second she felt dizzy in the darkness behind her closed eyes, but it faded and she was left feeling just a little tingly as if her mirage powers were in constant use.

"Okay, Scorch. Get up and open your eyes," Sonya whispered.

Scorch did as she was told and opened her eyes slowly. They focused immediately on an object at her paws. Was that *herself*?

Her body laid right before her, seemingly resting. But it shocked her to the core and she couldn't tear her gaze away. She just looked so... lifeless. Her red and black patched fur was still and the fluffy coat was stretched over her thin frame that showed her bony ribs beneath its kit-like softness. Her paws... they were so tiny that they looked like they could just fall away if she walked for too long and

disappear in the snow.

"Its funny, you never know how you really look like until you really see yourself for the first time," Sonya mewed behind her.

Scorch jumped a little, since Sonya also was lying down in front of her but at the same time standing just behind her. "How... are we doing this?" she asked, moving her paw to stroke her fur. She felt the fur, it was amazingly soft and cold, but it didn't move.

"It would take too long to explain. But basically we successfully removed our souls from our bodies. We have disappeared from the world," Sonya mewed as she led her out from underneath the dock and stood on top of it.

"Wait!" Scorch's heart thudded. "Are we dead?"

"No!" Sonya giggled.

"But you just said-"

"Perhaps 'disappear' is the wrong word. We can still return to our bodies when we need to, but for right now only we can see each other. Even the stars are fooled." Sonya turned her happy face toward the breeze coming off of the unmoving lake.

"This is where it all started..." Sonya closed her eyes and breathed in the cold scents.

"What?" Scorch didn't understand, but she had just noticed something else. "Your eyes... they've changed."

"So have yours," Sonya opened her eyes and looked at her. They were no longer pale and brilliant, now they were dark and drowning; almost black in color, they were such a deep green.

"You have my eyes?" Scorch guessed. She hadn't known her eyes were so compelling- since she had only seen her reflection in stormy pools of water. She could stare at them forever and feel warm and safe.

"Correct. And you have mine," Sonya mewed.

"Oh, sorry," Scorch mewed sheepishly.

"Don't worry! Its alright. They are still your eyes, our eyes have just switched colors," Sonya explained.

Scorch didn't understand why or how- frankly she had a lot of questions to be answered- but right now she was more interested in what was going on with their bodies.

"Just don't worry about it too much. 'Kay, Scorch?" Sonya purred, turning those dark green eyes on her and Scorch found herself nodding- completely satisfied. The answers- she could feel- were already in her. She just was not yet aware of them.

"Sonya, how do you know so much about these strange things?" Scorch asked, a little jealous.

"I'll tell you later. But right now we need to get moving or we won't make it back before sunrise," Sonya mewed.

"Why do we have to be back by sunrise?" Scorch asked, following Sonya as she broke into a run with Scorch at her paws. She took a moment to marvel at the blur of scenery around them as they moved at unimaginable speeds.

"I'll just tell you it would be very bad if our souls are caught by the sun. What we are doing now can only be done during the time of night," Sonya explained, stopping to leap high over a small willow tree.

Scorch skidded to a stop and looked at her in amazement. "How did you do that?!" Scorch asked, feeling bubbly excitement.

Sonya grinned wider and looked at her, "Since we are not attached to our physical bodies, we do not have physical limitations. We can do whatever we want!"

Scorch nodded, not quite understanding the concept, but enough to look up at the one pine tree still around them and focus on the top branches. She jumped, using her tingling power to propel her forward rather than her muscles.

She was flying! It was a marvelous sensation as she went up and up as her leap took her through the air until she touched down on the top waving branches. Not a sound breaking the night's perfect silence. Sonya soon joined her and the two young cats stared wide-eyed at their glorious surroundings.

The iced lake glittered like a silver cloak and the snow served as a soft blanket to the rest of the scenery while the trees, shrubs, and rocks snuggled beneath the snow cover like lumps in a nest. "Its so beautiful," Scorch whispered, looking up to see the night sky fully cleared of clouds. The ink black canvas was decorated with stars and stardust in shades of deep blue and pearly white that was so dynamic Scorch felt small. The moon, on its way to becoming fully rounded, sat heavily and gave off its pure white light upon the snow and ice.

"Sonya? Do you ever feel like you've seen something before- but know you haven't- but it still feels like you have?" Scorch whispered. As wonderful as everything looked now, she could imagine it in a way she'd never seen it. Lush green slopes and moss covered boulders- sprinkling blue waters with silver flashing fish splashing in it- golden rays of sunlight dappling the ground and hiding away its light in water droplets to shine spectacularly for one moment.

"I have not. But I could imagine it," Sonya whispered back. There was an ache in the voice, a longing want so evident. *So she isn't a crazy, happy go-lucky that doesn't care about anything*, Scorch stared at her, wondering what went on in that head. But she could grab no sense, and those dark eyes wouldn't betray any easier that those pale ones had.

"Well, we better get going. The camp is right there," Sonya nodded at an opening that was centered between two frozen streams. Sonya leaped down and Scorch followed, thinking how much less scarier heights were when it didn't hurt to fall.

They continued the run to the camp and were there within three seconds time. They stood just in front of the streams. "Hey, Sonya? Who is your leader?" Scorch asked, looking at the kit that was watching her.

"No cat really," Sonya shrugged. "I'm just here because they invited me into their home. I don't fight for them or anything. Though if I had to say I have a leader, that would probably be you."

Scorch felt uncomfortable at that. Sonya's eyes were glowing with trusting confidence again. "Well, who is the leader of these cats?" Scorch asked instead.

Sonya looked away, "I do not know."

Scorch had to wonder if that were even possible, but there was no deception in her eyes. "Is there a leader?"

"Yes, but I have not met him. He doesn't live here and doesn't usually even visit the camp when he gives messages. He leaves Regin in charge most of the time," Sonya explained.

"Okay, well, lets go see that camp now," Scorch sighed, hoping Sonya hadn't been lying when she said nothing could see them.

"Alright!" Sonya cheered, jumping over the ice in front of her. "I'll give you the grand tour!" Scorch looked up at the night sentry. The thin silver-tabby she-cat didn't flinch as they walked right past her nose. *Wow, this would be awesome for spying! Though, isn't that what I'm doing now?*

Scorch stopped dead as a voice floated to her ears. She whipped her head around, ears pricked as she searched for the source of the sound.

"Are you okay, Scorch?" Sonya asked. Her tone was worried, but her eyes were knowing.

"What is that den?" Scorch asked, nodding across the clearing where she'd found was where the voice was coming from.

"That is the leader's den," Sonya led her over to it. It was a den made by two boulder slabs slanted against each other to create a small cave beneath them. Moss grew on it and when it was full it would have been a great cover for sunlight and privacy. But now- in the cold season- it was dried and brown and would do little to keep out the cold. Obviously, the den was not usually used as a den.

"That voice..." Scorch murmured to herself, shivering slightly. Then another voice spoke up, one she had heard before and sent instant fear shooting through her. Her paws became rooted to the ground and all she could see was black and red and feel a thick, dripping sensation on her skin.

"I think we should leave,"Scorch mewed abruptly. The only thing she wanted now was to get as far away from this place as possible.

"But you need to see what is going on inside," Sonya protested.

"I've seen enough," Scorch answered curtly, turning to run.

"No, you haven't," Sonya's happy voice lowered to a growl and she appeared in front of her and stalked in front of her in a threatening position. "You need to look in that den, now!" The forcefulness and authority in her stance mingled with the compelling power of those dark eyes and Scorch found herself more afraid of Sonya than a cat who could not see her.

A moment later she was pushing through the brittle moss strands while Sonya sat outside, her happy face returned as she nodded encouragement. The den was dimly lit and small, but Scorch could see it as if it were illuminated by a thousand stars and found more than enough room to maneuver.

There were two other cats in the den and Scorch found herself focused on the one cat she dreaded meeting more than anything. His menacing grin, his curved ivory claws, his brown eyes that burned with unending blood-lust. All she remembered about how he looked like was just as apparent here as it had been on a blood-stained battlefield.

His brown paws and black coat singled him out well enough, but she recognized those other features first as she looked at Nightwing. "That's all very nice... but I'm saying that I can't help you right now," he was growling at the other cat.

Scorch looked at the other cat, more saddened than scared. The black tom cat looked small next to Nightwing, but he seemed quite at ease and spoke with confidence. "You should be able to ignore

that little rebellion long enough to keep to our terms," Crowpelt mewed as an answer, green eyes narrowed in sharpness.

Nightwing fumed, "That *little* rebellion is jeopardizing the lives and trust of my cats!"

"Then you should have beat it earlier," Crowpelt snapped.

"If you were to just lend me a few more of your cats... I could finish it in an afternoon and we could be back on schedule for the attack," Nightwing mewed.

"I have already told you my terms. All the cats that do not mind fighting for you have already been helping out. I am not interested in losing the trust of my own cats because you are incompetent," Crowpelt snapped back. Scorch was almost impressed with how forceful Crowpelt was being in the face of the murderer.

"I wouldn't talk like that if I were you. It was you who came to me to help you beat Pinefur," Nightwing growled.

"And yet, I have helped you more than you have helped me," Crowpelt shot right back.

"Look, if we just combined our forces, we can crush these cats before they know what hit them. It wouldn't even be dangerous for us, we could be all healed up in half a moon and marching against Pinefur," Nightwing turned to coaxing to get what he wanted.

"Not interested. If you ignore them, we can beat Pinefur while they have their backs turned and be back to drive them out before a moon has passed," Crowpelt yawned.

Nightwing jumped to his paws. "I can't wait that long!"

"And why not," Crowpelt glared up at the big tom.

"I am not foolish enough to think that they will do nothing while we are distracted. They are sure to take it as an opportunity to strike back and then we lose one both fronts," Nightwing growled.

"You give them too much credit."

"You underestimate them too much," Nightwing retorted. "They are conniving and clever and they don't seem to be bothered with usual 'warrior' tactics to win. They will use whatever they can to bring me down."

"You are the same way. Why are you so surprised?" Crowpelt questioned.

Nightwing dropped his head, "I know that if they were not being infested with rogues they would see the only way to beat me was in an all-out battle which I would inevitably win. But they have rogues among them. Rogues that do not see honor in the same light as the warriors of old did; That makes them unpredictable and a threat."

Scorch felt a shudder. It was true enough of a statement. She did not see it as wrong to steal in order to win. In fact, she didn't think it would be wrong to kill their enemies if they had to. But wasn't that how all the warriors felt anyways?

"Why are you so against helping me?" Crowpelt started arguing again. "These are the terms we established, besides if we defeated Pinefur, you get hold of three territories while I just get WindClan back. You receive the most gain, don't you think?"

Nightwing snorted and shrugged. Even now Scorch could see the hungry gleam in his eye. One thing was apparent; Nightwing had no intention of leaving WindClan in peace. But Crowpelt seemed oblivious to it all in his delusional dreams.

"Well, I can't help you anymore. I've already done more than enough," Crowpelt mewed, getting to his paws.

"What was that?" Nightwing growled in sharp annoyance.

"Like I just said, I have already helped you more than I needed to. I've given you all the information I could get and acted as good as a spy for you," Crowpelt answered.

"Lets not forget that you almost killed my daughter. There's a debt on that I have yet to collect," Nightwing snarled.

"Your daughter was sloppy and revealed herself. Had she known

that I was a spy as well, she would have revealed me, no doubt. Just be happy I didn't kill her and I managed to fool most of the cats into thinking she was dead," Crowpelt mewed in a warning tone.

Nightwing grumbled and sat back down again. He flexed his claws and did not seem ready to give up on extra reinforcements yet. *I really hope he doesn't get them, we won't be able to fight against those numbers!* Worries flooded her, along with the disturbing knowledge that Crowpelt had been conspiring with Nightwing behind their backs. It showed everything in a nasty light.

When I thought I was safe, I wasn't. When I thought he was trustworthy, he wasn't. And now I know he's been helping Nightwing for moons. If not for him... we maybe could have beat Nightwing already and then we would have helped him defeat Pinefur! We have the same goal, but now we couldn't work together if we wanted...

The sad irony of it all was that she was watching this all unfold and still unable to do anything, as always. She felt as helpless as when the warriors had gone for battle and she'd been left behind and forgotten.

She had missed a few exchanges in her anxious thoughts and now Crowpelt was leaning back, regarding Nightwing through his green eyes. "What can I do to convince you?" he mused.

Scorch's heart jumped and Nightwing pounced on the opening. "End the rebellion yourself," his mew was already half triumphant.

Crowpelt jumped. "What? All by myself? That's impossible! Besides, Scorch is already suspicious of me. If I give her more of a reason to doubt my loyalty than she is sure to go talk to Sunstar and have him do something, that crazy old leader will do just about anything she tells him-" Scorch shrunk in her skin, *perhaps it would be better if Sunstar didn't listen to me too much.*

Crowpelt's ramble of protests was stopped as Nightwing whacked him across the face with such force his head hit the boulder wall. "You idiot! I'm not talking about fighting or anything difficult. All you need is *that kit*!" Nightwing hissed furiously in Crowpelt's face.

"Wha-?"

"That kit is the tie that holds them all together! Any moron could see it! If she's gone, they fall apart in a moment. I don't know what that kit is or what she does, but she's dangerous," Nightwing spat. "If you bring that kit to me, I swear I'll bring my forces and we'll march on Pinefur and liberate WindClan the dawn after."

Scorch felt crushing surrealism envelope her. These cats were talking about her- her life specifically- and it was the token to Crowpelt's desires. Would he trade her for his dreams? Or would he see how far he was going and stop?

Finally Crowpelt looked up, a hard look in his eyes. "If the price for WindClan's freedom is a kit's life, so be it. I can deliver Scorch to your camp tomorrow, do you want her dead or alive?"

Scorch felt like she was falling down a deep, dark hole as she watched. It was out of reach, out or grasp, out of her control as she spiraled down seeking but finding no comfort. "*But you'll be okay, just hold on a little longer*."

Scorch breathed, grasping that little ray of warmth. *Thanks Sonya*. But the warm feeling soon faded.

"I want her alive," Nightwing growled, turning and facing her invisible body with a fang-showing smile and a cackling laugh.. "I want to see the fear on her face."

Chapter 33: Scarlet Midnight

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Scorch jumped at a light tap on her shoulder. She pulled her eyes away from the horrible but fascinating nightmare in front of her to look to her side.

Sonya stood there, dark eyes gentle. "Come on, we need to go now."

Scorch nodded slowly, remaining silent and shakily following Sonya out of the den as Crowpelt and Nightwing continued sorting out the details of their malicious plot. She followed Sonya blindly out of the camp and into RiverClan territory. She felt like she was made of ice-cold but fragile- and with each step a tremor shook her. She was just waiting for something to happen and for her to shatter.

"Scorch!" Sonya's voice stirred her enough to raise her eyes from the ground and look at the fierce-eyed kit. "Don't worry, it'll all work out," Sonya soothed in a voice as comforting as a mother's murmurs.

"How?" Scorch felt like crying as the ice started thawing. "I know the odds; if Crowpelt really has another force, we won't be able to win! Not only that, but now my life is in their bargain! I don't know if I could beat Crowpelt in a fight, and he's WindClan so he's supposed to be very fast... probably fast enough that I couldn't outrun him!" Scorch could feel the black walls of reality closing in around her. Not knowing which way to turn or where to run, she stared at Sonya.

"You forgot something. Your life is in the bargain, correct?" Sonya prodded. "You're afraid of losing your life as well."

Scorch shivered. She didn't like thinking about it- not when all the cats around her risked their lives without complaint. But the dark loom of death that had attached itself to her life was a frightful thing, and her greatest nightmare. A nightmare that appeared in the form of a black tom with brown eyes and paws that glowed red

with blood... She was shaking again.

"Just focus on me," Sonya mewed. Scorch looked at her, the red and white kit stood as small as she was, but in front of her confidence made the kit seem so much bigger. The faint silver light of the setting moon sent silver shadows upon Sonya as her dark green eyes glowed with steady comfort and Scorch drank it in. "One thing at a time. Right now, we need to get back to our bodies. Than we can figure out what happens next."

Scorch nodded, grateful for the composed and calming touch from this strange kit. "Now, lets hurry," Sonya led her at dizzying speeds back to the dock and soon they standing above their bodies, light blue light glowed on the horizon and time was running out- although Scorch didn't know exactly what would happen if the sun rose upon them.

"Alright, this is far easier than when we left our bodies. Just close your eyes and center your powers on yourself. You should feel like you're falling, but don't stop focusing until you've touched the ground," Sonya mewed.

"Wait- what do you mean *should?"* Scorch asked.

"Oh, I didn't mention? I've never done this before," Sonya shrugged. "Now come on, we have to hurry!"

Scorch wasn't feeling more confident after that, but she followed the instructions. She homed her tingling senses inward, drawing in the sensations into her mind until she felt overwhelmed until she perceived that she was slowly falling down as though through thick water- slowly, slowly, ever so slowly...

"There! All done!" Sonya's voice chirped loudly in her ear. Scorch popped her eyes open and saw a twin pair of crystal green eyes directly in front of her.

"Sonya?" Scorch mewed, recognizing those eyes though also recalling dark green ones. But these lighter one fit Sonya's excitable personality so much better.

"Yep! Everything's back to normal," Sonya mewed, sounding quite pleased as she leaned back and began playing with Scorch's whiskers with a paw.

"Excellent!" Scorch gave a sigh of relief and stretched, getting to her paws and making sure everything was working right. The quiet and overwhelming sensations had calmed her worries.

"Now, we just need to figure out what to do with Crowpelt," Sonya mused.

Scorch frowned, "You know him?"

"Yes, but before you ask how. I can't tell you," Sonya answered.

"Actually I was going to ask when you found out. Since you told me that you didn't know who the leader was of those cats," Scorch mewed, narrowing her eyes in slight annoyance.

"Oh... Well, I never said I didn't know his name. I just said I didn't know him. Which is true, I've maybe exchanged a few words with him... But that's not the point of this discussion. He's going to try to bring you to Nightwing who will- no doubt- attempt to kill you," Sonya summed up.

"Yeah... but how did you know that?" Scorch was still stunned. Was Sonya not as oblivious to the conflict as she seemed? Or had she just been listening as well? *If that's the case, she could have stayed close for moral support!*

"Don't bother yourself with that," Sonya grinned. "Just be glad that I can help you!" Sonya's smile grew broader but a glint shone in her eyes.

The sun was just just rising, golden light pushing across the sky as they climbed out from underneath the dock and sat on top of it. "The sky is turning red, that's a bad sign," Scorch worried. Bad- or changing- weather was sure to be coming.

"That's just silly. Besides, I would think the weather is the least of our problems," Sonya mused.

"Wait, are you helping me instead your cats? Cause Crowpelt is kind of your leader..." Scorch trailed off, confused.

"I told you before, didn't I? You are the closest thing to a leader for me. I would pick you over those cats in a heartbeat," Sonya mewed, nudging her gently. "You can trust me, I would like you to anyways," Sonya added softly.

Scorch dropped her head. "I don't think I know what trust feels like anymore. Its been so long since I've felt honesty..." she trailed off. Even Boulderpaw had some hint of deception in him. And no matter how much she trusted and respected what he had chosen to keep secret, it was still there- a faint black shadow over their relationship.

And now, I'm hiding this from him. Is there any difference? Is it unfair for me to expect honesty when I'm not being honest either?

"But you can trust me, right?" Sonya mewed again, sounding slightly hurt.

Scorch turned and looked at those pleading green eyes. She was wary from trusting Sonya because she could sense absolutely nothing from her. But all Sonya had ever done was try to help her, and Scorch got the feeling that Sonya understood her and her powers more than any other cat did or could.

"Yes," she breathed, she could feel her heart beating hard in- what? Fear? Exhilaration? It could have been either, or both. "I trust you."

Sonya brightened and purred. "And I trust you," she laughed. Scorch laughed with her, small giggles ringing out over the frozen lake and warming the air with their touch. Even with the darkness looming closer, a few rays of light still brightened the way.

"Well, we can't stay here. Its far too open, you'd get snatched away in a moment!" Sonya mewed.

Scorch jumped up, "We should go back to my camp. Its the safest place and we can warn Sunstar and the others about Crowpelt's and Nightwing's alliance," she mewed worriedly. If Crowpelt was kicked

out of their camp, would it push him to join all his forces with Nightwing's? Perhaps they should just warn Sunstar and have Crowpelt detained, or...

Scorch didn't know, but she knew she'd figure it out as she and Sonya entered the snowy forest. After they had traveled a little ways into the forest, Sonya stopped abruptly beside her. Scorch turned and looked over her shoulder, continuing forward as she frowned in confusion at Sonya's extra-giddy smile.

"What?" the words were barely out of her mouth as a fireball of gray shot out and wrestled her to the ground in the snow.

"What do you think you are doing?! Leaving camp like that and making me worry! You better be ready to make up for that!" Boulderpaw's cross mews scolded her harshly as he kept her pinned down on her back with his paws gripping her shoulders tightly.

"Uh... sorry?" Scorch mewed.

"Not good enough!" Boulderpaw huffed.

"Wait... have you been out here all night?" Scorch asked worriedly.

"I wasn't going back to camp without you!" Boulderpaw snapped irritably. "Besides, I slept before the battle. I'm more worried about you, two adventures in the same day? Are you crazy?" Boulderpaw growled. "Besides-" he broke off abruptly and Scorch followed his gaze, seeing that he had spotted Sonya. "Besides... who is that?"

Sonya waved her tail in greeting. "I'll tell you if you get off of Scorch!" Sonya called, eyes playful.

Boulderpaw released Scorch and she sat up as he stared suspiciously at Sonya. Scorch flicked her tail worriedly, what would the Clan think of Sonya? Boulderpaw's stormy blue eyes showed intense distrust, more than what Scorch may have thought relevant.

"Is that the kit you were telling me about?" Boulderpaw growled to her in a undertone.

Scorch nodded, watching in apprehension. She wouldn't intervene

yet, but Boulderpaw looked like he was growing more and more unsettled. "Hello, my name is Sonya," the she-cat smiled cheerfully as she trotted forward, tail lifted straight up in the air, clearly not bothered by Boulderpaw's staring.

Boulderpaw pulled back in response and flared his nose as he drank in her scent. "You don't smell like a Clan cat," he growled.

"Probably because I'm not," Sonya replied happily.

"I guessed from the name, but if you've lived here long enough..." Boulderpaw responded, stopping to stare again. Sonya giggled a little at his weird expression. Scorch felt a tingling sensation that flashed hot over her face.

"We need to get to camp, quick," Scorch cut into the silence abruptly.

Boulderpaw turned to look at her, "You're bringing a stranger to camp?! How do you know you can trust her!" he hissed.

"Its okay, I'm only here to help Scorch. Nothing more, nothing less," Sonya purred, skipping up to them and flicking some snow off Scorch's shoulders with her tail.

Boulderpaw stared at her questioningly and Scorch looked back blankly. She had no reason for trusting this cat. All she knew was that Sonya was a part of her life that would not be leaving anytime soon- and that it was probably a good thing.

"I want her to come," Scorch mewed simply. She begged with her eyes that Boulderpaw wouldn't create a fuss. After all, Crowpelt was probably on his way back here right now and if he caught them... Scorch suddenly shivered and jumped up, full of energy.

"We need to get moving now!" The camp was the safe haven, Crowpelt wouldn't be able to get her if she got to Sunstar first. Other complications could wait, but she couldn't allow herself to be taken captive to Nightwing just to be killed. That was the one way she really didn't want to die.

Sonya nodded and they streaked off, Boulderpaw trailing them as

he tried to keep up. "Wait for me!" he called.

"Hurry up!" Scorch called back. Her heart was thumping and she imagined she saw moving shadows all around them as the white light of dawn raced through the forest at their paws.

"Scorch, there is something I may have forgotten to mention," Sonya murmured. The whipping of the wind almost tore the words away but Scorch heard the cold tone of them clearly.

"What?" she asked, turning to look at the she-kit who was effortlessly keeping up with her. She looked no more exhausted than Scorch felt, but something in her expression turned Scorch's paws cold.

"Although it does not seem like time passes when we extract and reconnect our souls, it actually does," Sonya mewed.

"Is that why it was dawn when we awoke but it hadn't quite been dawn when we went into our bodies again?" Scorch asked. She hadn't stopped to wonder about it... but it did make sense.

Sonya nodded. "So it is quite likely that Crowpelt is around here, or has even passed us by now." Sonya had that tone again that suggested she knew more than she was telling.

"Is that so," Scorch mewed breezily.

"You said you trusted me," Sonya pointed out at the slight accusatory tone Scorch used.

Scorch stopped and looked deep into Sonya's eyes. Sonya looked anxious and worried, but determined. Something was bothering her, but she would push past it. But what was it? Scorch didn't know, she couldn't even begin to guess since she could get no sense of what Sonya was feeling.

"I do trust you. To an extent. But I only just met you, I can't let Boulderpaw or any other cat know that," Scorch whispered. She looked at the gray tom that was panting and stumbling on his paws. Guilt pricked her; first she had kept him up all night after a tiring day, and now she was asking him to run on an empty belly.

"Are we almost there?" Boulderpaw wheezed.

Scorch looked at their surroundings. "We're about half way there," she mewed. Pines towered around them once again and the white strips of the wintry dawn laid across the snow and ran over their pelts, slanting away from the direction of the lake.

"Half way..." Sonya whispered. She looked up, bright eyes focusing on Scorch. "I need you to promise me something right now," Sonya mewed quickly, eyes flicking around warily.

"Yes?" Scorch felt a chill creep over her at the serious appearance that had overlaid the kit's happy demeanor.

"No matter what happens, just don't give up hope. Can you do that?"

Scorch stared at Sonya. It was a simple question -and something she'd been doing for the past few moons anyways- but the way Sonya said it as if it were a test made her wary.

She took a deep breath and looked away. "Its pointless the promise something when you have no intention of keeping that promise. And its just as pointless to promise something you were going to do anyway."

Sonya grinned at her. "Life is hard; sometimes a spoken promise keeps it from falling apart," she whispered in Scorch's ear. "Now come on!"

Scorch bounded after Sonya again, flicking her ears back and smiling at the groan Boulderpaw gave before he stubbornly launched himself into a sprint again. The clear air, the flashing snow, friends around her; Scorch felt her worries drift away for a moment. After that, the world came swirling in... it happened so fast.

Then cold slammed down on her. No, not cold. Darkness. Was there a difference? It was cold and dark and it occupied all of Scorch's senses. But she wasn't unconscious, she was still thinking, right? Or maybe she was coming out of unconsciousness? Had it all just been

a dream? But when had she fallen asleep?

With no perception of time, Scorch was lost in the cold darkness. It was a numbing cold, a cold you couldn't really feel but you knew it was cold. And the darkness wasn't the same you got when you closed your eyes to sleep or the dark of night. It was more stifling like that. Wait.. where was the air?!

Panicked, Scorch heaved her head up, coughing and spluttering as she gulped in air. Light permeated her vision and she blinked back at the world. But it wasn't the same world. Where has she gone? The sky was still rosy with the sunrise, the light still pale yellow, and pines still green. But the snow was changed. It was red.

She stumbled to her paws- a difficult task when she couldn't feel anything. She swayed as she stood, looking around and soon falling as the ground disappeared beneath her. What's going on? Her thoughts were drowsy and her vision turned greenish as if she were seeing through ivy-green light. Only her heartbeat hit her ears.

But a voice was still beside her. She felt it more than heard it- the swelling tone that rose from the belly rather than the throat. "Get up! Get up!" the words broke through in terrific ringing.

Lifting her lead eye again she saw crazed blue eyes and recognized Boulderpaw's fuzzy image. *Why is he bloody?* A fresh red cut glistened on his cheek and blood drops decorated his chest fur.

But he didn't stop to answer her unspoken questions. He nudged her roughly and Scorch felt like she had gone through this before. Was *I knocked unconscious? But by who? And where is Sonya?* She just noticed that the ginger and white kit was not nearby her even though she had just been running at her side.

She felt limp as Boulderpaw dragged her through the pine forest. Ice had grasped her in its cruel jaws but she was too cold to even shiver and she just silently wished the nagging agony to leave her be as she continued putting one liquid leg in front of the other.

Boulderpaw's voice kept talking to her through huffs as he pulled her along on her unresponsive paws. But it was faraway and more

of a soothing hush than a means of keeping her mind active. However she had been in very similar situations before and knew that if she fell asleep now she would not be waking again.

As she made more of an effort to stay awake and do more of her walking, a piercing headache fought back, driving her to the seclusion of no thoughts again. But she still managed a few thoughts as they trekked through the dangerously cold and blurry forest for several agonizing minutes.

Was she hurt? She didn't know, she couldn't feel anything and she didn't have the strength to look back over her fur. What had happened to Sonya? She'd been right there, running beside her and than... What had happened? Scorch felt like she'd woken up with her head shoved in the snow. Had Boulderpaw not been injured and in such an agitated state she would have guessed she'd fallen in a snow drift. And another question, where were her answers? When she'd opened her eyes, there were less cats instead of more. But blood didn't lie. It didn't just appear. But there was no cat to answer her questions. To cat labeled as responsible.

"Where are we?" she wheezed.

"Close to the lake," Boulderpaw's answer rang in her head over and over until she caught its meaning.

"Close to camp?" she stopped her movements at the effort.

"No."

Scorch pondered that for a while, but had no strength to ask anything more. When had she gotten so tired? She felt drained when she remembered being full of unaccountable energy not too long ago. She closed her eyes and felt herself drifting in cold nothingness.

"Scorch! Stay awake!" Boulderpaw's sharp call barely made her eyes flutter lightly. She turned and her side gently fell onto a soft, cold cloud in her dream. *Its so peaceful... I'll just stay like this for awhile.*

Awhile wasn't very long. Warmth awoke her before long. But it was

the wrong kind of warmth, the heat the came from pain flowing through her. Her eyes opened, weak strength granted her the ability to see snowflakes coming down over the lake with the distance a hazy white blur. *When did clouds move back in? It was clear and sunny just a moment ago...*

Her eyes rested with confusion upon a lump of fur close by her. Red bled through the gray fur of the cat as she stared at the back of the cat. But the appearance of a third party halted her dreadful wondering, a gangly black cat with piercing green eyes. He looked familiar...

"Its Crowpelt, Scorch." Scorch's eyes flew wide open at Sonya's voice and energy coursed through her along with understanding as if a shock wave had vibrated within her. Her breath came fast, eyes darting as she searched for Sonya, she had to be close, right?

Crowpelt stalked closer, a grimly determined look on his face. "Sorry I have to do this," he growled, his paws were blood red and left stained marks in the clean snow.

"You hurt Boulderpaw?" she gasped, stumbling backward and finding her paws- though she still couldn't feel them. The ground was unsteady beneath her and she hardly remained upright as she backed away hastily, still facing him.

"Yes, and you," Crowpelt growled. Scorch winced, she couldn't feel any pain. And that probably was not a good thing, but it relived her of that burden for now.

"What about Sonya?" she asked, clumsily falling into a drift of snow and scrambling out again as Crowpelt came steadily closer.

"Who?" he growled, green eyes narrowing as he lowered his head down to her level.

Scorch held her tongue from speaking any further. Besides, she wasn't the one who knew who Sonya was. "Why are you doing this?" she gasped as her legs started trembling. They wouldn't last her much longer- due either to shock, hunger, or blood loss she wasn't certain.

"I've told you this before. My one and only loyalty is to WindClan. I was told to save my Clan; that is what I'm doing. With your life I will receive help from Nightwing and we will free WindClan," the black tom meowed.

"Are you sure?" Scorch's voice was faint, but it still held the power that every challenge possessed.

Crowpelt paused and she stopped as well, hardly two fox-lengths were between them. "I am sure he wants to take down Pinefur, and after that battle neither of use will have the energy to fight each other for the time being. I will have time to raise more cats behind me to defend myself while he's busy trying to keep all three other Clan under his control."

"So you're willing to betray all the other Clan and all their cats just for your own?" Scorch retained a hint of disgust.

"Exactly, that's what loyalty means. Willing to do anything for it, absolutely *anything,"* Crowpelt snarled, pinning back his ears and showing his fangs. "If it were up to me, I'd kill you quickly and painlessly. But he wants you alive."

Scorch looked around desperately, the tree branches were high but if she were quick enough...

"Not a chance!" Crowpelt pounced on her as if she were a piece of prey- catching her with his clawed paws as she weakly struggled. "You're willing to die saving RiverClan and ShadowClan, right? You should be willing to die for my Clan too," Crowpelt mewed coldly.

Scorch looked down at her small body. His claws gripped her shoulders so tightly that any movement ended in agony while his paws pressed down against her stomach, trapping her against the snow. "I'm happy to die fighting, a sacrifice meant to break courage *isn't* something I'm happy with," Scorch responded, coughing up a little blood.

Now she was aware of the pain, a long slice curving over her belly and reaching up for her tender throat. It was almost deadly, but the cold had slowed the blood flow down enough. But that was the

missing wound, a miss that was costing her now. "We both share the same goal; to get rid of the tyrants. Why break us down instead of helping us? If not for you and your cats we could have defeated Nightwing by now and be fighting Pinefur!" she choked out, blood dribbling from the side of her mouth as she coughed on it.

"How did you know about my cats?" Crowpelt bent his muzzle toward her.

Scorch looked up at him, eyes wide as she stared into his unresponsive eyes. With the new knowledge of the force her eyes possessed, she used them as an answer far superior to words. "I know a lot that I shouldn't." The words were too true and too painful for her, but she passed them by her lips anyways. Knowing full well that she had knocked again on the gate of despair by driving her mind there. She just hoped it was worth losing herself to save others.

There was no time to dwell on it though, Crowpelt raised his paw- sheathing his claws. She stared at him all the while and saw his paw tremble. "I know too much as well," Crowpelt's eyes wavered as he flashed his paw down. Than weariness fell over her again as her eyes closed and she fell back into the snow. This time rest came as an unbroken spell at scarlet midnight.

...

Awareness was a long time coming again to Scorch. But she had lost judgment of time again and it may as well have been five hundred seasons or five seconds. When she did regain consciousness, she was aware of nothing but the throbbing pain that consisted of her body.

Next, she became aware of the cold. It bit at her ears and chiseled at her fur to give icy relief to the sting of her wounds. The frost in the air permeated her lungs and her breath froze on her whiskers and weighed them down uncomfortably. It was a friend to her wounds, but a deadly demon to the rest of her; for she felt ice fill her through to her bones.

Blinking open her eyes was a fight in itself, she could feel a scratch over her right, black eye-lid that ached painfully as she forced her

eyes open. But she was thankful that it had not affected her vision. Although she almost wished it had when she saw what was around her.

She was in a small dark alcove, comforting shadows fell thickly all around her but missed her, leaving her feeling exposed. The gorse bushes that surrounded her stretched their curved, skeletal branches up against the dense pine-clouded sky. It was evidently night once more.

There was one opening in the three by four tail length room, and it was blocked by a large black warrior. Even before the brown eyes opened, she'd recognized by scent that it was Nightwing. She tried to move her legs, but she bit her tongue as she felt sharp thorns dig into her skin.

"You're finally awake," Nightwing grumbled, his voice held the force of thunder but it lacked the majesty- it more similarly resembled the cawing of an old crow.

"Where am I?" she asked, avoiding looking at him to stop the tremors. They came anyways and a cold sweat sprang over her. No creature her age should have been forced to face their nightmares alone. But here she was, all alone in the dark with only Nightwing. For her, he was as good as any bringer of death. But he was worse because he dawdled.

"Can't you guess? I sent an invite and a special escort to accompany you to my humble home," Nightwing answered, lifting his head and slanting his eyes down on her.

"Of course," she murmured. "And the brambles wrapped around my legs?"

"Complimentary."

Silence reigned, but Nightwing's strange behavior toward her had given Scorch a breath. If he wasn't acting like himself he was either feeling wary or overconfident. Both could be used to her advantage. However she was in too much pain to clearly think or clearly use her senses to know what Nightwing was really feeling.

She slightly looked over her fur. Several times she had been sure her fur could not possibly become messier, but now she was wholeheartedly convinced this was the time that she would always use as a comparison. Her prickly black and red fur was clumped with dried blood in several places and her fur had been torn off in several other places to reveal sensitive pink skin. None of her injuries were very serious, but they were numerous enough to be extremely painful as one wound amplified the pain of another.

Not only that, but her front two paws and back to paws were bound with bramble tendrils that resulted with a fresh scratch when she moved. They weren't wrapped tightly but were looped around her legs enough that it was probably impossible for her to get them off without any help.

Does it even matter? You're going to die. Just accept it. Her mind was working against her now as she slithered down the slope devoid of hope. *But I'm not dead yet, right? There's always some hope! She tried to scramble back up the slope, but Nightwing's glinting eyes blocked the way. Maybe for a capable cat! There's no way a helpless kit that can see into the past would survive this. The past won't heal your wounds and it won't fight your future battles!*

Future... it was a strange words and one that she had not thought much about. Always thinking about the past, what had happened, what cats had lived and died, what they had done to survive, and how that affected the present. Did it matter when compared to the future? The past was stained with shadows and glittered with light, but it was immoveable. It would never change. The future was an unshaped landscape. A landscape she would probably never see unfold.

Nightwing was standing over her, "Hey? Did you hear me kit?" he snapped.

Scorch looked at him dumbly. "No."

He hissed and flashed his paw over her face, sharp pain resulted as a new cut bled on her cheek. "Than you should have payed attention," he growled, lowering his face near her.

Scorch didn't respond. She was at his mercy, and it was a mercy she had no trust in. She wouldn't endear herself to him and she wouldn't fight him. It had no effect in the end.

"I want you to tell me something," Nightwing growled. "So listen very carefully."

Scorch blinked at him and stifled a yawn. She felt exhausted... "I'm listening."

"You remind me of a cat I don't like, do you know who it is?" Nightwing growled, starting to pace around her.

Scorch wanted to shiver as he walked behind her unprotected back. She could guess the answer, all the old cats seemed to be very interested in her. "Rainstone?" she spoke her mother's name. Without the hope of seeing her parents again, the secret had lost its meaning.

"That's it," Nightwing breathed. "How do you know that cat?" Nightwing stared hard into her eyes, brown eyes burning.

No, her parents were still her secret. "I met her before I came to the forest. She and her mate were looking for a place to live," she lied.

Nightwing snorted. "How far and how long ago was that?"

"It was three moons ago now, or close to that long ago," Scorch took a sharp breath. She'd lived away from her parents for almost half her life now. One more moon, that was the remaining time. "I don't know how far away it was, I got lost after that. I haven't the slightest clue where they are."

"You're lying!" Nightwing's eyes blazed.

Why is it that cat's think you're lying when you aren't, but are fooled when you do lie? "Sorry, but I'm not," Scorch answered in a level tone, lifting her head slightly. "But I'm more interested in talking about what's going to happen next rather than things I hardly remember."

Nightwing narrowed his eyes and regarded her for a moment. "I

hope you know by now that I have no intention of letting you go alive. In fact, on my honor you won't get out of this alive. But I'm not killing you yet, there would be no fun in that," he licked his muzzle, eyes glinting with an eerie light.

"If you're looking for information about RiverClan and ShadowClan, I don't have any. And if you're thinking about killing me and delivering my body to them, it'll only make them angrier. I wouldn't advise doing that. Angry cats are unpredictable," she mewed dully. She felt her eyes glazing as she causally talked about the reactions that could be expected from her death. *Maybe I really am out of hope.*

"Scorch, you're rather sharp. Its almost a shame I have to kill you," Nightwing chortled to himself, turning to leave.

"And why do you need to kill me?" Scorch murmured exhaustively as she laid her head on the cold ground. She told herself she had hope, she told herself it was still there. She told herself that she would die honorably and her courage would be inspiring. But it hurt. It pierced deep down in a pain that would not ease or go away.

She breathed and closed her eyes to dream away the pain for what would probably be the last time. The moon shone down on her that night as she dreamed. It was a full moon and at midnight all the cats in the forest saw its eerie red color. All but Scorch as she shivered in the nightmare sleep offered her.

Chapter 34: The Sun Sets

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Scorch laid on her side, her eyes watching nothing. *I wish I could have some water...* But there wasn't even any snow left in her little prison for her to lap at meagerly. It wasn't even a prison, really, since there was no guard. Had her legs not been wrapped in bramble tendrils, she imagined that she could have made an easy escape.

The sun was just rising on the first morning of her stay as Nightwing's prisoner. She wasn't sure what he had planned exactly, since she hadn't seen him after waking from sleep. And part of her wished she would have awoken dead. It would be worse to have to live through the nightmare she had dreamed that night.

The nightmare was scary enough, and the pain then wasn't even real... how horrible will it be in real life? She didn't know, and the silence she was subjected to gave rise to awful imaginations about her upcoming death. Would she be killed in front of others as some grand spectacle? Or would Nightwing do it secretly? Would it be quick, or drawn out? Would it be by claw or tooth, or perhaps poison?

The unending uncertainties kept growing more and more gruesome until Scorch felt that she must be hallowed eyed and shivering. The ache of her wounds kept her awake as pale light shone through the pine-tree rafters. Her ears pricked, something was odd...

The sun had cleared the horizon, or had just about- she couldn't tell very well with the tall gorse around her. But the camp that laid beyond her enclosure was incredibly silent although the pungent scent of NightClan cats was as strong as before.

Curiosity battled with apathy until she finally decided that she couldn't do anything even if she were curious so she laid down on her head again and waited. The air was cold and settled moodily

upon her melancholy. Her mind wasn't working, for once in her life she wasn't thinking of anything. Or at least she wasn't conscious of thinking about anything.

I've heard of despair, I've even sensed it from other cats. But I never thought I would experience it. Despair was a cold thing, indeed, she felt weak and empty. Time had turned from seeming indefinite to painfully short and inexplicably fast.

She was teetering on the edge of consciousness again as she reached for the land of dreams. She would take even nightmares over the world right now, nightmares gave her feeling at least- this life had nothing for her right now.

Scorch closed her eye and breathed a sigh of relief as she drifted in the dark sky of unconsciousness. "*Are you giving up*?"

The voice tapped on the ice of her mind. *No, I am just waiting.*

"For what? Nothing will happen if you're always waiting. You have to make things happen yourself, if you don't, its as good as giving up, for 'later' turns to 'never' in a heartbeat!"

Scorch flickered her ears, this wasn't quite a dream. *Maybe I have given up, then, there is nothing I can do right now. I'm trapped and beaten. It hurts and I'm tired, I couldn't do anything even if I wanted. I'll just have to wait for some other cat to help me first*. Scorch sighed, it really did feel like she was giving up. But she couldn't see anyway out of this hopeless situation on her own, what was she supposed to do?

"That's no excuse! You promised no matter what you would not give up hope! You said you had no intention of giving up hope! Where has your courage gone? Does it flee the moment things become difficult? It doesn't matter if you're a kit or weak, if you just get up and fight, something will happen!

Scorch snorted, wishing to drive the voice from her mind. *Something like getting myself killed?*

"*Possible*," the voice admitted and now Scorch almost recognized it.

"*But you will die for sure if you don't do anything. Miracles won't happen if you don't look for them...*" The voice was fading, an echoing whisper that slowly vibrated the sheet of ice over her head until a clear crack broke through.

Scorch's eyes sprang open. The voice was Sonya's. Why had she not recognized it earlier? And where was Sonya? She didn't know, but a fierce fire blazed in shame at the bottom of her soul. She'd really given an entire night to despair and hopelessness. Death may await her, but giving in wouldn't make it go away.

She gritted her teeth, remembering how Nightwing had completely been in control of her last night. She'd even talked about Rainstone a little! And she hadn't even done that for Boulderpaw. Well, she wasn't going to let Nightwing have any power over her mind anymore. He may still be her nightmare, but she wouldn't curl up and cower beneath it. She'd hiss and fight right back.

Scorch looked around. Silence still reigned heavily in the air. It would make her heard more easily, since there were no other sounds to drown her out. But it'd also help her hear approaching cats, so there was some compromise of positives and negatives on that.

The big trouble was the brambles wrapped around her legs. She took a deep breath, steadying herself as she stretched her neck and gripped a thick stick in her mouth. Slowly she pulled her front paws closer to her muzzle as she leaned down, cracking the stick between her teeth as the brambles that had already left sore spots dug deeper and tore at her skin.

She stopped and spat out the stick, chewing on her lip as she saw the blood running down over her paws. Carefully, she grabbed the end of the tendril- grimacing as a few bramble thorns cut at her mouth- and grunted as she unwrapped the tendril over her paws with painstaking care that still squeezed a few tears out of her squinting eyes.

Only once did she pause and gasp for breath, when she heard a pair of paw-steps pass right by the entrance of her alcove. But they did not pause and her back was to the entrance, hiding what she was

doing. She continued to free her paws and- had she not been in an enemy camp- would have cried for joy as her front paws came free.

The skin just above her paws was shredded with scratches and blood continued to trickle out into her fur and splatter on the ground. But they were free and the relief was life-saving. She than turned to the bramble on her back paws, which came off much easier with the help of her front paws. Soon she laid on the ground, panting but released from her binds. *I bet Nightwing didn't think I could endure that in silence! Ha!*

Scorch stared at the blood-stained bramble tendrils for a moment. How simply a thing of nature had been used for pain and destruction. Not even in her mirages had she seen nature used in such a way. She sat up and turned to look at the entrance, carefully licking the wounds on her legs. It would be bad for her to leave a trail of blood to be followed.

But now came the next part of the escape, how to get out of camp without being spotted? With her legs so beaten up and her not having eaten in two days, she wouldn't be able to win in a chase. So, how to get out?

Going through the camp was a no. Waiting for night to sneak out was a no as well, she had no idea when a cat would come to check up on her. She needed to be gone by then. What about through the barrier? She looked around at the gorse. Walking over to it she tried to fit through the only conceivable gap she could find, only to end up with herself trapped half-way through it. Pulling back out, she shook out her fur.

"*Try looking up*?" Sonya's voice was clear this time and Scorch raised her eyes toward the sky. Dense green pine-boughs stretched over the camp, but no tree trunk lay in her den. Could she get to one without being spotted? Besides that, could she travel discreetly at such a height? She shivered, being high in trees when not in a physical body was one thing. Jumping from one tree to the next with a badly worn body was a whole other thing.

Scorch chewed her lip as she padded around the perimeter of her den, glancing out about the camp. Only a few cats seemed to be

out, and they didn't seem to be watching her den. More importantly, she spotted a tree trunk just three tail-lengths from the entrance of her den.

Her heart started to beat heavily. Could she climb fast enough and jump quick enough to lose any cat that spotted her? Scorch wasn't sure, but she wasn't about to stop where she was. Focusing her gaze on the tree trunk, she unsheathed her front claws but kept her back ones sheathed, just as Boulderpaw had taught her.

"*Use your front claws to guide, and your back paws to propel*." That's what he had said, and she had thought him silly as she used all four of her claws to scramble up. But he had gotten up much faster than she had. *I guess this is as good a time as any to try his way out!*

She crouched in the shadow of the entrance, making sure no cat was looking her way. She would climb up on the side that faced the barrier and hope she was quiet enough to not draw any attention. Scorch dashed forward, silent and swift over the cold, bare ground that froze burns on her paws.

Scorch reached her claws up on the pine tree and bounded up as easily as a squirrel, her thin, light frame working well in her favor as her back paws pushed her up effortlessly. Once up, she wasted no time in trotting along a concentrated line from branch to branch as her paws pattered lightly.

She didn't give herself time to think as she peered through the pine branches at the slight gap between trees, gathering herself together as if she were just going to hop over a puddle she bounded from one tree to the other. Her heartbeat pounded heavily, but it didn't speed up and her paws channeled the slightly nervous energy into faster and more concentrated trotting.

Although- as concentrated as she was- she had become aware that the leap had stirred a murmur in the camp below her. She'd been noticed, but not necessarily spotted. Keeping herself in the thick of the pine branches, she went higher to increase the cover and ignored the increasing height that loomed below her like a gaping maw.

Another ignored leap took her out of the camp. But she didn't allow herself to relax, if she dropped her guard the fears that were being carefully restrained in tight energy would envelope her and cause many detrimental mistakes. Sheer willpower kept Scorch from losing her grip on focus as she professionally ignored the kittenish fear of heights.

One branch, then the next, and another, keep going, walk forward. Her thoughts were focused with this, barely keeping fear contained as she heard a loud, warning yowl behind her as her absence was discovered in the camp of silence.

She urged herself on to a faster pace until she was nearly running through the trees. Up, duck, jump, turn, oops- you tripped- catch yourself, forward again. Her thoughts came every second and were followed without delay by subsequent movement on her part.

Scorch was getting closer, already she was half-way back toward territory that ShadowClan and RiverClan held. The camp was far behind her now, and the yells and shouts were scattered around her. They did not know where to find her. This escape was easy, it just needed to be completed.

Now she allowed her self more time as she slowed to a walk along the tree branches, keeping her eyes locked steadily ahead as she stubbornly refused to look down. Scorch's nerves acted up with her now less busy mind and the fear of the drop begged her to look down.

"*Don't give up! You're almost there*!" Sonya's voice gave the perfect encouragement and Scorch flung her fears to the back of her mind as she defiantly strode forward with self-assuring confidence.

Mirages are only so useful; Scorch had surly learned much by watching them. But that did not make up for real-life experiences. At only six and a half moons, Scorch was still practically a kit. How could she have known to watch for dead branches that, heavy under the weight of snow, were made brittle in the harsh cold.

When she made the jump, she never heard the snap. She never saw the world swirl as she fell. She never made a sound as she fell softly

into the snow. Silence reigned over her stiff body, and the forest did not dare raise itself against the sacred silence of the sleeping kit. But cats are not always as wise as the forest. And they dare where the forest would rather remain silent.

...

Scorch faded into a deep sleep and a sweven came over her. It was crystal clear, but not of a place one would usually dream of. It was a high, cold desolate place with sweeping flurries that rocked her on her unstable paws. The wind gnawed colder than in real life while tall, dark peaks loomed troublesomely at the edges of her vision.

"I don't know this p-p-place," her teeth chattered as she spoke. She was shivering so hard that she could have fallen over and down into the deep abyss beneath her.

The rock was brown beneath her paws, but the stone was gray around her as it disappeared behind the veil of snow. "How did I get here? I was just jumping through trees, I think..." Scorch trailed off, realizing she was speaking only to herself as the lonely wind howled below her.

She gasped as she stepped forward and her paws slipped on ice, clear as glass, and her paws almost went sliding over the edge of the round-topped peak she stood upon. "Is there a worse place I could have ended up in?" she groaned, but she had the slight idea that this was actually a dream. The hint was given mostly by the fact that she didn't remember anything previous of this, what she'd been doing had drifted away. She just barely recalled a tone of fear.

"I assure you, there are worse places to meet," a voice spoke, heavily accented and muffled by the wind. Scorch felt her heart light up as she turned around. It wasn't the voice of Sonya, that filled her with unadulterated energy and excitement. And it wasn't Boulderpaw's who touched on her curiosity and more tender feelings. But it was a feeling of profound relief and joy that rushed through her very core at this voice.

"Song," her mew came out as a purr. The black she-cat looked thin

and little more than a shadow in the swinging flurry of snow. But there was a new strength in those ancient amber eyes that stirred Scorch's patriotic spirit.

"Scorch, I am glad to see you again. It has been some time, hasn't it?" Song mused, amber eyes scanning the landscape with famished hunger as if she'd gone too long without seeing this.

"It has been awhile, but I'm a little confused. Where are we?"

Song paused in her gazing to look at her. "This is a dream, you are not actually here."

"Wait- this is a real place?!" Scorch shivered, she couldn't imagine living in a less friendly place.

"Yes, this is the place I lived and died. And the land where your mother was born," Song's tone was sharp, and her eyes slightly reproachful. "I happen to think this is the most beautiful place in the world," the ancient black she-cat added.

Scorch looked around with new eyes, she only knew that her mother had been born in the mountains. She didn't know where that was or what they looked like- but from what she saw, she wasn't extremely impressed. *I bet they had to work hard just to keep from falling off their trails!*

"That's besides the point. I had you come here for an important reason," Song turned toward her with a suddenly serious expression.

Scorch waited, wondering. When it came to Song, she was as clueless as she was about Sonya. Never knowing what to expect from them- but that was an important part of their relationship.

"That cat you met, Sonya," Song murmured, eyes flashing.

"What about her? She's a strange cat, isn't she?" Scorch mewed, eyes glowing as she thought about her.

"As strange as you are," Song retorted, she didn't look pleased with Sonya. "She is a special cat, like you. But unlike you, she is not connected to any special ancestors. We do not know why she has

those powers, she is just a common loner- granted I know loners can be extraordinary- but there is no explanation to why she is *this* extraordinary," Song mewed.

Frowning, Scorch wasn't sure she understood. "Does it matter *why* she is special? I know she is, and so do you. Does the rest matter?"

Song shook her head. "I mentioned it, didn't I? She is not related to any special ancestor, that means she has no guide. And a young cat with incredible power but without a guide is dangerous, to others as well as themselves."

"I don't think she is dangerous. And she seems to know more than I do. Sonya is a good cat and I trust her," Scorch mewed.

Song's eyes turned cold. "And what if I told you it was her fault that you got captured by Nightwing?"

Those words dropped liked lighting bolts onto Scorch.

"I don't know how she knew, but she led you to the exact place that Crowpelt was traveling to. And she influenced your escape by tree, which was your second mistake," Song mewed.

Tree? Scorch shook with fear, for some reason she was glad she didn't remember. "This *is* just a dream, right? I'm not dead or anything..."

Song shook her head, "No, you're still alive. But I assure you everything is far from guaranteed. I don't know why Sonya got you captured, but I strongly advise that you do not trust her again. At the same time, you should keep her close- don't let her know that you don't trust her and find out what she is trying to do."

Scorch was shaking her head at the end, "I can't do that to a friend! Its wrong..." Scorch trembled with indecision. *I don't know for sure that Sonya got me captured, it could have just been coincidence. And she encouraged me to escape, she never actually mentioned trees. Song is just being overly suspicious.*

Convincing herself on that, she turned away from Song- feeling torn over whether she should trust Song's intuition or Sonya's loyalty. "I

just don't think that I can't trust Sonya. I feel like I can, and I don't know for sure that she really intended for me to get captured," Scorch mewed in a low voice.

Song sighed, "Well, I cannot live your life for you. Make your own decisions, but I still advise you to be wary of believing everything she says or does. Keep a wary eye out, Scorch, that's all any cat can do."

And with that, Scorch felt dizzy and went to sit down. But she never made it, she'd faded to into the thick smoke of sleep and it didn't loosen its intoxicating grip for a long time.

...

Scorch was conscious of the dream slipping away as she came upon the horizon of consciousness. She tried desperately to stay within the dream, but it slipped through her tight grip and she soon knew she was conscious as she laid still, eyes closed and breathing rhythm maintained.

Voices rumbled around her, pricking at her with sharpness and cold notes. She carefully gave herself a mental scan, she did not seem to be restrained, but she did feel more achy than before and she was also definitely not among familiar cats. These were NightClan cats that she heard and she barely worked up the strength to face them.

Opening her eyes, she sat up slowly. No one noticed her at first, she had been laid by the barrier inside the camp she had so recently managed to escape from. Nightwing was there, scornfully growling at a few cowering cats on the opposite side of the camp. A good many other black cats milled around and a tense atmosphere of strange unwilling anticipation held complete silence- with the exception of Nightwing's inaudible growls.

Scorch remained silent, still dazed from the dream she had just had. Her eyes silently gazed around, but she never moved her head an inch. She did not try to hear what Nightwing was growling about, it would not interest her and she could tell from his tone that he was angry already.

A small black she-cat with brown eyes was the first to notice her consciousness. Scorch expressionlessly recognized her as the one that had tried to kill her in the last battle she had taken part of. The small she-cat looked around for a moment- upset and undecided- but sighed and padded over to Nightwing.

"What?!" Nightwing snapped as the cat interrupted him.

The black she-cat mewed something in a steady, low voice. Scorch was impressed that this cat could remain unruffled in the face of fury of such a well-known murderer. Scorch wasn't the only one, other cats were watching the black she-cat respectfully.

Nightwing had calmed down at the she-cat's words and glanced toward her. Scorch met his gaze mildly- she was no longer despairing or hopeless, that was the power she possessed at the moment- she could feign a brave face now. The two black cats padded back toward her and Scorch tilted her head up to look at them, feeling equanimity fill her.

"You are quite the troublemaker, aren't you?" Nightwing scowled, brown eyes looking at her with loathing.

Scorch stared right back at those demonic pits. "I am a prisoner, it is only natural that I try to escape. It would be odd if I did not try to preserve my life."

The small she-cat's eyes flashed, a feeling of understanding emanated from her, but she remained silent and watched Nightwing for his answer. "True, but I'm sure you noticed the new scars on your skin? Escaping has its punishments too, it would be more self-preserving to be obedient in the face of power."

Scorch tilted her head, "Your words are logical, but not realistic. The feelings of a cat in imprisonment is only those of a fierce desire for freedom, no matter what the cost. A long broken cat may act like you suppose, but I am young and stupid, trial and error are my nature as of now."

She knew she had spoken well, for Nightwing's glimmered with anger but a sheen of enjoyment. It was the enjoyment part that

oppressed her spirit though- the thought that her predicament was amusing was outrageous. She choked it down though, because although she wouldn't acknowledge it, Nightwing's words were half-right.

"Wing, you're in charge of her," Nightwing tasked the small she-cat.

Wing dipped her head and turned toward her, "Can you walk?" she mewed as Nightwing turned away and barked out orders and profanities.

"Yes, and I'd like to ask where we are going," Scorch answered cautiously, getting to her beaten paws.

"None of your concern."

"Can I ask what happened and how I was recaptured?" Scorch asked after a mutinous silence.

"You were found by a search party unconscious under a pine tree with a broken branch by you. It is assumed you fell," Wing briefly related.

"I don't remember," Scorch mewed.

"I would advise that you do not remain troublesome, Nightwing has already had a fit over you. It will take little to urge him to kill you," Wing mewed shortly, herding her in front of her.

Scorch was silent as she was herded in front of Wing at the back of a patrol that consisted of the entire camp as cats channeled out into the forest. She ignored the murmurs and stares and the laughs and sneers- she did not care for the time being, though a lesser cat would have been put on edge.

She did not like how they were walking in a grim determined line and the way cats seemed to be steadying their nerves. Scorch especially didn't like how a small patrol of cats with mixed pelts joined and dispersed among them soon after departure.

Scorch felt a flush of anger as she saw Crowpelt among the new group. He had done this, it was his fault that she was in this

position and that cats would be fighting for their very existence soon. But he pretended not to see her as he walked behind Nightwing. But she knew he felt her stare, her usually warm eyes boring cold at the back of his head.

But he reminded her of another cat. Sonya. Was it possible that she really had meant for this to happen? Scorch didn't know. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. But she was also sure that she would know someday. *It's impossible for Sonya to have done this, I felt her, she's like me. She's special, not dangerous. Song just doesn't know her like I do.*

Doubts can never completely be driven away, only ignored. When she wondered about what she knew about Sonya, Song's claims didn't seem unlikely. But as soon as she remembered Sonya's wide, genuine smile and sparkling eyes, all her doubts seemed ridiculous. *After all, how can a smile lie?*

Scorch stumbled suddenly, her legs felt frozen as she tried to catch herself. She fell into the snow but Wing picked her up before a second passed. Wing's grip wasn't gentle, but she didn't bump her against her legs as she walked along.

Scorch relaxed in the grip, the small pain on her scruff was little in the relief her aching legs gained. If she was going to die soon, why wear herself out? *Why conserve energy?* Her mind echoed satirically. She ignored it and enjoyed the small pleasantness of rest after exhaustion.

"Wait, Wing, bring me Scorch," Scorch kept her eyes closed as Nightwing summoned her. She felt herself placed on the snow and when she opened her eyes, Wing was back in the lines of cats and a small circle contained her and Nightwing.

"Scorch, do you know where we are going?" Nightwing asked, smiling cruelly.

"To the ShadowClan and RiverClan camp," Scorch answered back, it was hard to not hear the murmurs of the cats around her.

"Yes, and do you know why we brought you with us?"

"Not for anything good," Scorch sighed.

"No, not for you," Nightwing laughed.

Scorch shivered inwardly, just a prickle of fear infiltrating her accepting demeanor.

"Those fools seem to adore you in their own way. To see you killed in front of then will terrify them and break them. We will annihilate them afterward and this whole business will be over." Nightwing looked quite satisfied.

Scorch was silent. It was an odd plan, a little risky. But he was definitely confident. Could she point out the flaws and encourage him to devise a plan that would help her more? Or use his flawed idea as her chance? The golden moment sat before her, could she take it and use it?

"There are some flaws in your plan," Scorch spoke up. This was a chance she needed to take, though she shuddered at what she planned to propose. "Killing me in front of them would enrage them, they'd cry later after they defeated you with the added rage my death would cause, for I am not sentimental to them in such a regard."

Nightwing paused, frowning as he opened his mouth with silent protest. Scorch blinked, her words had hit home. Doubt wet the air. Nightwing narrowed his eyes. "Maybe I should kill you now?" he challenged, stepping closer with unsheathed claws.

"If I were you, I would beat me up real bad- though you've already done that- and than give me back to them for the battle. Cats will be worried and not thinking straight and than kill me as victory. Of course, that's only if I were you. I seem to have lost all power over my li-"

The words froze in her mouth. She blinked slowly and looked up at Nightwing, his shadow heavy over her. "You're suddenly too calm. You were scared silly last night, now you're trying to manipulate me. I knew you were dangerous," Nightwing's whispered words tickled her ears with their malice.

Scorch now knew her mistake. It shot through her mind like a bolt of blazing fire, so obvious she was ashamed. She'd made Nightwing scared, she had made him anxious. It had been an even worse taste for him since he had been in the opposite position just last night. A coward is dangerous and unpredictable, she should have known that. Now she had lost.

His back was a wide black blur as he turned away from her, paws stained red like in her nightmares. But this was not a nightmare, the pain stole her breath and her blood poured out onto the snow like water. Horrified fantasy danced across her vision. She fell to the ground like an unbalanced warrior, her throat torn out and gushing her life out and away from her- giving it to the world.

Scorch was frozen, she wouldn't have been able to stand had she had the energy- she was so engrossed with her own demise. *This is it. That's all it took. One wrong word, the golden moment is gone, and now the sun sets.*

Scorch gave a shuddering breath and laid still, awaiting the eternal dream to come for her.

Chapter 35: Red Snow

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The rush of the wind rose into a crescendo, cold and brisk as it rolled off the ice. Gray light made its way through closed eyelids as Boulderpaw foggily came through. He sat up- unsteady- and blinked in confusion at the dark gray light.

The wind shook the pine branches above him with noisy rustling and flashes of gray sky came through in the dimly lit forest. Shivering, he looked around at the silent forest. Churned snow, broken ferns, blood splatters. Everything rushed back to him upon these sights and Boulderpaw felt nauseous as he recalled the event.

He'd been following Scorch and this strange cat when it'd happened. A blur of black had shot down and slammed Scorch into the ground before he could gather a breath. The strange cat had disappeared as soon as it happened and Boulderpaw had wasted no time in throwing himself at the attacker the who he quickly realized was Crowpelt.

All his mistrust that he had supposed was unfounded had hardened. But he knew he was no match for the warrior, all his struggled were in vain and it was sheer luck that Crowpelt ended up tangled in a briar bush and allowed him time to grab Scorch and go in vain escape.

After that he'd headed for the lake, hoping to either lose or catch the attention of others in the immense openness of the lake. But he'd been injured and exhausted by then; Scorch even more so. Crowpelt had caught up and Boulderpaw gave the last of his strength to the fight.

He didn't know what had happened after that. Now he was here, all lone. Where was Scorch? Where was Crowpelt? What had happened? These questions weren't going to be answered by the age-old pines and he pushed himself to his paws, wincing slightly at

the painful wounds on his chest and sides that burned like a hornet's sting.

Panting heavily, he started dragging his heavy paws toward camp. With any luck Scorch had made it there, she always seemed to be able to take care of himself. If they were even lucky, Crowpelt would be captured. That would be nice...

His legs wobbled and his breath came short as he floundered around in the drifts of snow. He continued on, he needed to get to camp. That was all. The dark light was slowly lightening and he realized it must be morning, though the gray cover kept things shrouded in dimness.

As he walked, absentminded, he became aware of a strange sound. More specifically, the strange lack of sound. Even the wind had died down and not a thing stirred but him. By now the sun must have cleared the horizon and his blue eyes scanned the area around him suspiciously. He had caught the faint scent of another cat.

"Come out, I know you're here," he rasped, surprised by how dry his mouth was and licking his muzzle.

Out stepped the cat, white and ginger paws brilliant against the gray snow and bright green eyes that could have almost been stars. "You," Boulderpaw growled, laying back his ears. She was the one that had disappeared when he and Scorch had needed help- besides that, he instinctively didn't like the way she looked, too much like Scorch.

"Boulderpaw," the voice was solemn, the bright eyes heavy but glowing with earnest. She had been all smiles when Scorch had introduced him, radiating with confidence and joy. But now she looked like a different cat with a serious expression that resulted from a dark conscience.

"I need you to listen to me," the cat continued, stepping forward.

Boulderpaw growled and in a flash of anger leaped at her, easily pinning the small cat down on her back beneath him. "You need to listen to me. You ran away when Scorch needed you, right after she

told me she trusted you! How could you do that to a sweet cat like Scorch, she's too innocent to see the bad sides of cats- I know- but you're too young to fail at such a simple test of character!"

Boulderpaw ranted angrily, claws inching out and clasping the kit.

She stared up at him, eyes empty. "I was not using Scorch or being manipulative. But I have a duty, to see the future go forward as it is supposed to."

Her words made no sense to his marcid mind and he curled his claws tighter in exasperation. "Speak so that I understand you!"

The she-kit's eyes flashed. "Get off of me and maybe I'll make more sense!"

"Why does me holding you down affect that?" Boulderpaw snapped, anger fading but frustration building.

"You are too angry to think rationally and you need help for those wounds," the kit spoke calmly.

Boulderpaw could see the sense through the fog of his mind and he growled as he retracted him claws and stepped backward to sit in the snow. The kit stood up and watched him carefully. "Drink the snow, than clean your wounds," the kit instructed.

"That's it?" he scoffed, he didn't need to be told to do that. He just wanted to get to camp first.

"I'm not terribly knowledgeable in the herbs here. Were we where I'm from I could whip something up, but not here especially in the snow," the kit defended herself mildly.

"Scorch isn't from here and she manages just fine," he grumbled as he took a mouthful of snow and waited for it to melt in his mouth.

"Scorch has a much greater recourse of knowledge to draw from than I," the kit mewed.

"Again with not making sense. Do you know where Scorch is?" he asked.

"Yes, she is sleeping right now after escaping from Nghtwing's camp," the kit mewed.

Boulderpaw sighed in relief. "So she's alright?"

"I don't know about that..."

Boulderpaw narrowed his eyes, "You just said she escaped, right? That means she's at our camp, right?"

The kit stared at him, "I did not come to talk to you about that. You remember my name, right? Sonya?"

"Yeah, yeah," Boulderpaw waved his tail. Truthfully, he had forgotten it in the chaos, but he wasn't going to admit that.

"Scorch is in a difficult position right now. But you have to leave her be," Sonya instructed.

"I'll help her if I want to!" he shot back.

"No, you need to get to your camp and prepare your Clan-mates for battle. Nightwing is planning on marching on them today with reinforcements and than he'll march on WindClan and ThunderClan."

Fear shot through Boulderpaw, ThunderClan was in danger? He anxiously looked in the direction of his beloved Clan, but only saw swamped shadows and pines. "If that's true, I need to get back to my own Clan and warn them!" all thoughts but those of ThunderClan were lost.

"No, you need to help ShadowClan and RiverClan stop them here or there is no hope and Nightwing will grip the entire forest. That means the deaths of many," Sonya warned.

"But my Clan," Boulderpaw chewed his lip.

"The best way to help it is to stop Nightwing before he can get to it. And no matter what he says, stay strong for yourself and for others." And with that Sonya turned and leaped up into the trees. Boulderpaw didn't see her creeping along the branches and a breath

didn't stir the pine boughs, she had just vanished.

But his worries were all focused on the impending march of Nightwing as he hurried to the camp after finishing cleansing his wounds- which made him feel slightly refreshed. Worries for his sister and mother occupied his thoughts, with him here, who would defend them? Who would warn them?

Pinefur was sure to throw the lower-level Clan cats at Nightwing first to tire his cats out and than send his elite groups to finish Nightwing off. But how many Clan cats would be killed with that reckless tactic? *Not that Pinefur would care,* Boulderpaw growled at his own hypothetical thoughts. He could see Pinefur now, green eyes watching calmly as apprentice tore at apprentice- completely innocent but forced into a corner nonetheless.

A shiver chilled his spine and he limped faster, the camp was almost within sight. Hurrying, he sighed in relief that Nightwing wasn't here yet. If Sonya was right, their defeat or victory would spell the destruction or survival of the Clans.

Boulderpaw's eyes glimmered, he had never imagined he'd be part of something so spectacular. He walked along the log over the snow-covered marsh and went through the camp entrance. Cats were out and about, looking smoothed-pelt but an undercurrent of apprehension ran thick.

His entrance was quickly spotted and Sunstar, Painted, and Flashpaw were in front of him before he could even blink. "Where have you been?" "Where's Scorch?" What happened to you!" the aghast cries started up as they noticed his wounds.

"Let me thought, let me through," Flickertail pushed his way through the crowd and quickly looked over his pelt with cool amber eyes. "Come to my den quickly now, we don't want infection setting in. You all leave him alone until afterward."

The crowd allowed the two of them to travel to the medicine-cat den, but Sunstar followed imposingly. Boulderpaw felt irritation stir in him as the yellow leader followed him. "Don't you have cats to calm?" he snapped.

"They will be easier to calm when I know the details, which only you can tell me," Sunstar mewed as they entered the den, eyes cold as he looked down.

Flickertail started treating his wounds and Boulderpaw missed Scorch's warm scent and her small paws that quickly and efficiently treated his aching spots and left them feeling as good as new. Flickertail's paws were firm and hard and his tail flicked with unnerving nervous energy.

"Now, maybe you'd like to tell me where you were all day yesterday, how you got those wounds, and where Scorch is," Sunstar sat down across from him in the small den, his eyes betraying nothing of what he was feeling.

"Most of yesterday it seems I was knocked out, half-way from here to RiverClan territory- I'm surprised you didn't find me," he veiled the insult. "Scorch and I were traveling back to camp- don't ask where we were, I wasn't with her until she was back in the territory- when we were attacked," Boulderpaw's voice dropped to a scowling growl.

"By Nightwing's cats?" Flickertail guessed.

"No, by Crowpelt." A hush fell over them. Sunstar and Flickertail swapped a wary look.

"He hasn't returned since then either, we feared he might be involved. Do you know why he attacked you?" Sunstar continued.

Boulderpaw shook his head, "But when I woke up, Scorch was gone."

"Than we have to assume he took her to Nightwing," Sunstar's mew was heavy.

"Nightwing?! Why would he do that?!" Boulderpaw jumped, he knew Scorch had escaped from Nightwing but he hadn't thought Crowpelt had been responsible, after all, they all knew how much Nightwing loathed Scorch and that included Crowpelt.

"Crowpelt has been working with Nightwing since the beginning,"

Sunstar explained. "He's been lending cats he has gathered to himself and offering favors to Nigthwing in return of the black devil's help in freeing WindClan. ThunderClan is also part of the exchange for Nightwing."

Boulderpaw stared, that was very close to what Sonya had said. "But how did you know that?"

Sunstar and Flickertail grinned at each other. "I'm a leader, I know everything." The great yellow cat got to his paws. "Everything's going according to what I predicted, however, Nightwing's malice toward Scorch was not part of my calculations. We'll have to figure something out to account for that."

He started for the entrance, Boulderpaw watched him with a flickering of respect. "He really knew all along?" he asked Flickertail when the leader had left.

"Yes, he only told me though, he didn't want the others to worry or to let it get out," Flickertail started putting herbs away.

"Is that why he didn't put the final blow down on Nightwing and follow Scorch's plans?"

"Yes, he was still gathering plans and resources. But now we are fully prepared and can go all out in this fight." Flickertail looked up, amber eyes serious. "But it will still not be an easy victory. Every cat will have to put themselves out there if we want to win."

Boulderpaw frowned, "What about Nightwing's increasing numbers?"

Flickertail laughed, "Don't worry about that. It's all under control."

He wasn't convinced, but thanked Flickertail and went out into the camp clearing to see the leader's ideas put into action. Brambles were being moved out, fresh-kill was being buried; preparations were already well underway. Boulderpaw went over to help, but was ordered to rest by every cat so he gave up and went to the den.

I suppose it won't be any good if I'm worn up before the battle has even started. He curled down in the soft warmth of his moss nest and

closed his eyes. With the buzz of activity around him, he felt calm and sleepy. All that he was missing was a familiar warmth and a soft voice.

...

"Wake up!"

Boulderpaw jumped out of his sleep, his dream shattering and whirling away- forever gone. He looked up and saw the bright gray eyes of Flashpaw. The light was dim again, the shadows thin but lengthening.

"Nightwing is almost here! Our scouts found him with his forces just as Sunstar said. He'll be here very soon!" Flashpaw bounced nervously on her paws as he sat up and gave his messy fur a quick grooming.

"Okay, I'm coming, what's the battle plan?" Boulderpaw stood up and followed the fellow apprentice out.

"Sunstar will explain, but basically we lure them in our trap that we set up and attack from four sides at once."

"Four?" Boulderpaw frowned, "Won't that stretch our forces to thin?"

Flashpaw shook her head, "No, since we'll all attack at once and be altogether. There's Sunstar, he's about to explain everything."

Sunstar stood on the rocks that made up his den, head held high with a crown of pine over his head. His eyes glowed with hidden strength and his muscles moved smoothly under his taut pelt. Right now, he looked more like a ShadowClan leader than a RiverClan one. *"No, he's a leader for all Clans at this moment."* Boulderpaw jumped as the voice whispered in his head, sending shivers going down his spine. Was that Sonya's voice? He looked around warily but did not see anything.

"Is something wrong?" Flashpaw watched him curiously.

"No, just thought I heard something."

Flashpaw blinked sympathetically, "Every cat is on edge right now. This is it, the last battle and than we're free."

Boulderpaw nodded tensely, his stomach churned. It was almost inevitable that some cat would die in this battle, who wouldn't make it? He scanned the sea of determined faces. He blinked in surprise. "Willowwater is fighting?"

Flashpaw nodded, frowning. "She's still pretty badly injured, but she insists on it." They looked at the heavily patched-up gray and black tabby she-cat. Although she stood awkwardly as if it hurt, her eyes burned the brightest in the crowd- anger flashing dangerously furious in her green depths.

"She looks pretty serious," he commented.

"Yeah, I haven't seen her look that angry since Rainstone left," Flashpaw mewed.

"Rainstone?" Boulderpaw swore he had heard that name before, but he didn't know who it was.

"She was a rogue she-cat that tried to stop Nightwing and Pinefur before they got to power. But things didn't work out well, and she left right after ShadowClan fell," Flashpaw explained.

"Did you know her?" Boulderpaw asked the older apprentice.

"Vaguely, she came to RiverClan for awhile when I was a kit. She even saved me from Nightwing once. She was funny looking and talked weird oh! She also had a lame paw. But I do know that she and Willowwater were best friends. Willowwater has always felt bitter that Rainstone left the Clans the way they were," Flashpaw whispered quickly.

"Shh, Sunstar's talking." The two apprentices were chided by Flickertail.

Boulderpaw dutifully turned his attention to Sunstar, but missed most of it because he was thinking about Rainstone. *A rogue she-cat helping the Clans? Looked different and talked differently? Is this some joke?* Not knowing whether to laugh or be unnerved, Boulderpaw

ignored those feelings and listened long enough to learn which patrol he would be on.

"Boulderpaw, you're with Shadowripple's group," Boulderpaw turned and padded over to the four other cats on the patrol. It was Jump, Mira, Newtlight, Shadowripple, and him. Not an impressive group, but they'd be capable enough.

"Ready to beat up Nightwing, Boulderpaw?" Newtlight grinned at him, she seemed to have forgotten he was from ThunderClan for the time being.

Mira and Jump looked less excited, their eyes worried- no doubt for Scorch. But they seemed determined enough. Boulderpaw had seen Jump fight before, the dirty white cat was quick-footed and lethal in his attacks. But he hadn't seen Mira, due to her healing broken leg.

"Will your leg be okay?" he asked, frowning Scorch had told him before how much trouble it had been given Mira.

"Its fine, I'll just try to stay on the edge of the fighting so that I can use tactic so that it doesn't come down to a show of strength," Mira smiled lightly.

Shadowripple nodded at them. "Alright; Mira and Newtlight, you'll help pull the trap. You other two jump in as soon as the trap is up. We will come in from the back, so we have to be careful not to be spotted until after the targets have moved into position."

Boulderpaw nodded and they left camp, quickly followed by two of the other patrols. They each turned their own way, each taking a corner of the wide snow-covered marsh that Nightwing would have to cross to get to the camp. *I hate to admit it, but Sunstar was a genius this time! I guess its not surprising- he is a leader.*

Boulderpaw pricked his ears as they settled into position. "I here them," he whispered.

Shadowripple nodded, her own ears were pricked and her eyes steady. The faint stripes on her black fur were bristling. "When you

see the signal, pull the trap," the patrol leader whispered as the two she-cats grabbed the pull for the trap.

Boulderpaw crouched down against the snow, they were hidden strategically behind two trees that cast them into shadow. All the patrol were hidden. All except Sunstar, he stood like a mini sun at the entrance of the camp.

His blue eyes locked on Nightwing, his black fur was slick and he looked incredibly haughty as he led his long line of cats over the bare snow marsh. Dim gray light rained down on them, they had no where to hide as they traversed steadily closer to where Sunstar was standing.

"Shouldn't the signal have been given by now?" he whispered, a little nervous.

"Wait for the signal," Shadowripple encouraged. Boulderpaw and Jump swapped a wary glance, Nightwing was half-way into the marsh, all of his cats were in position. The snow of the marsh was hard enough to keep them from sinking down, but soft enough that the churned snow would be easy to pull the trap through.

The seconds ticked on into moments. The moments into minutes. "There!" he breathed, Sunstar flashed his tail and four cats near him pulled on ivy tendrils near their paws. All around them tendrils were being pulled taunt in a cross-work pattern. Mira and Newtlight pulled on their own tendrils and up sprang the bramble ropes that had been weaved beneath the snow of Nightwing's cats.

Snow flew up and screeches of curses echoed in the air as cats became helplessly entangled in the chains of brambles. "Now! go!" Shadowripple led the charge as Boulderpaw and Jump flew behind her. Other cats were racing out in similar formations to tackle the attackers.

Just before they reached the cats Shadowripple whispered in their ears, "Remember, only attack black cats! Leave the others be unless they attack you!" They nodded, and in they jumped into the clash of tooth and claw.

Boulderpaw fell upon one of the outer warriors; he barely registered it was a black tom with silver paws and frozen gray eyes. Growls roared around him as the battle commenced and he dug his claws into the tom's back, adding his victim's agonized yowl to the noise.

He clung to the cat's back and churned his paws, causing dangerously deep wounds on the sides of the tom. He dug his teeth into the tom's ear and wondered why he just bucked and tried to shake him off instead of rolling.

Then he realized, the tom's legs were tangled in the brambles- he couldn't move. Gleeful, Boulderpaw easily lashed out several deep wounds over the tom's back, underside, and chest. His opponent growled stubbornly, but his blood was pouring out quickly and his angry silver eyes were glazed with pain.

The apprentice paused, standing in front of the helpless cat. He had obviously won- this cat would not be fighting anything for a moon- but did he kill the tom or drive him off? He looked around nervously, every cat was locked in a fight, most of the black cats had managed to free themselves form the brambles and were putting up quite a fight, though they kept getting caught again in the brambles that lay treacherously on the snowy ground. No cat lay motionless yet, and Boulderpaw wasn't sure what to do.

The warrior-like thing to do would be to let him go, but he's not a warrior. What's more, I'm not fighting for my Clan, I am completely outside the warrior-code. Without anything to guide his uncertain conscience, his thoughts turned to Scorch. *She would let him go, I think. But she's a rogue, so maybe she wouldn't?*

Even more frustrated, he turned away, allowing the tom to struggle free and limp off- leaving a trail of red snow behind him. Boulderpaw had paused to watch him limp off miserably, but attacking claws drew him out of his confused guilt.

Twisting and growling as he grappled with a furious black she-cat with white ears and front paws and narrowed blue eyes. They had rolled into the thick of the fighting and were surrounded with similarly ungraceful fights.

Boulderpaw growled and tucked his chin in, butting his head against the cat's jaws She screeched and drew back, her grip loosening. He wriggled out and gave her two long wounds below her neck before facing her again. Blood dripped down her chest and his fur clogged her claws, but her blue eyes glowed with wrath.

He settled himself to a fierce fight and launched himself at her. Down they went again in a wrestling match, but now Boulderpaw had the advantage of momentum. A few wounds later he had her pinned, his developing muscles outshining the slender cat's lanky one. *Scorch's strategy of starving them worked, they're in worse condition than us.*

A shadow over him caused him to look up. One of the multi-pelted cats in Nightwing's forces stood over him. He crouched, snarling as he prepared to fight. But the cat ignored him, launching to the other side and landing on a black cat that was holding Flashpaw at their mercy. *What?* Not quite understanding, but not willing to ask questions in the thick of battle, he gave the she-cat a fierce bite that would be felt in the morning and chased her out of the battle.

A flash of gold caught his eye as he returned to the battle. He turned and saw Sunstar throwing two black cats off his back before tackling one in front of him. Boulderpaw felt a snarl on his tongue as he recognized Crowpelt as one of the cats harassing Sunstar. His paws froze though, remembering how helpless he had been against him before.

But this time I'm rested and I've eaten, I'm stronger now. I can beat him and then ask him what he did to Scorch. Ignoring the fear that pulled at him he raced around the chaos of battle and lunged for Crowpelt's paws as he tried to attack Sunstar again.

Crowpelt hit the ground but was on his feet again in an instant as Boulderpaw put himself in between Sunstar and Crowpelt. Looking back now, he saw that Sunstar was facing Nigthwing and he shivered at the horrendous wounds that covered both of the leaders.

Staying focused on Crowpelt, he drew his lip back in a snarl. "This will be a more even fight," he growled.

"You sure about that?" Crowpelt sneered, crouching low to the ground and shooting himself at him.

He had done the exact same thing yesterday and Boulderpaw did a back-flip, landing just in front of where Crowpelt's slithering moves took him. He smirked as he brought his paws down on Crowpelt's head, but growled when Crowpelt rolled away and his paws flopped into the snow.

Pulling himself out of it, he whirled around and found himself exchanging lighting-fast strikes with Crowpelt. Black paws flashed around him and he was too busy avoiding them to pay attention to where his went. Crowpelt managed to grab one of his paws in his teeth and Boulderpaw hissed in pain as Crowpelt did his best to crush his paw.

Taking Crowpelt's slight distraction, he pounded Crowpelt's jaw and managed to release the paw and backed away, putting his bloody paw down on the cold ground. He flattened his ears as he faced Crowpelt again, fury flashing before him.

Crowpelt remained untouched by the searing emotions and leaped at him, outstretched paws aiming for his shoulders. Boulderpaw saw it, a crystal, frozen moment as Crowpelt hung over him- jaws slightly opened, claws out and grasping, body in a streamline position of energy aiming for a single point.

The moment was all it took. Crowpelt fell upon his mark and Boulderpaw had his own jaws in a ready position to dodge between the open paws and snap at Crowpelt's throat while the black cat's claws sank into his shoulders. They fell in a withering heap of tearing claws and snapping teeth.

But Boulderpaw's teeth had torn a dangerous gash at a tender spot and the blood came out most alarmingly. It was nearly a death blow and was more than enough to allow the apprentice to take down the warrior. Boulderpaw panted and trembled as he finally held Crowpelt pinned beneath him.

His paws were shaking from exhaustion and he was torn and bloody and one of his eyes was already swelled closed- but he had won.

Crowpelt's breath came in rapid pants and his blood flowed out more swiftly- creating a patch of red snow around them.

"I win," Boulderpaw growled. "Now tell me where Scorch is!" he spat, shaking the fainting tom savagely.

"Oh? You hadn't heard?" Nightwing's bloody sweet voice sent uncontrollable shivers up his spine. He looked at the black cat that was still facing Sunstar one-on-one. Both were even more torn and bloody, but neither were going to give up anytime soon.

"So you do have her! Where is she?!" Boulderpaw snarled, gripping Crowpelt more tightly with her claws in response to the fear he felt.

Nigthwing cackled and Sunstar glared. "Answer," the golden leader snarled.

"Oh, I will," Nightwing lowered his head to the ground and looked up at them maliciously. "She's dead, I killed her with my own claws." He lifted a bloodstained claw and licked it, watching them loftily.

Sunstar was unmoved, "You scum!" he growled.

Boulderpaw didn't do anything. He was frozen. All he knew was that it wasn't true. No way. Not in a million moons could Scorch just *disappear* like that. He stared at the red snow, eyes fixated with horror upon the disconnection between realities.

"Its true," Crowpelt gasped beneath him. "I checked, she wasn't breathing and had no heartbeat."

Boulderpaw slowly turned his head toward the defeated warrior. The black cat's green eyes were hollow, the last bit of life was drifting away, "I watched him do it. She's dead, and its as it should be," the cat could still muster a sneering tone.

Boulderpaw glared down at him, a savage emotion starting to pound under his frozen surface- anger would have been an understatement. It was pure, blistering animosity that caused him physical pain as it started cracking the cold shock of his mind.

"You'll pay for that! You are the one that betrayed Scorch to that monster!" Boulderpaw screeched and even Sunstar looked at him with nervous eyes.

"Oh yeah, apprentice? And what are you going to do?" the warrior goaded, a sneering smirk blanketing his exhausted face.

Boulderpaw didn't think. Raging violence unleashed itself on the defeated tom and Boulderpaw didn't stop to think until it was done. And there laid Crowpelt beneath his unsheathed claws, bloodstained and dead. Boulderpaw's breath came in heavy gasps as he waited for horror to come over the realization that he had done that, killed a cat in cold blood.

But it didn't come. He felt no regret, and it was no hard task to kick the dead body and growl, "Good riddance."

Nightwing and Sunstar had stopped their battle for a moment to watch him. Nightwing looked almost amused at the slaughter of his ally and Sunstar didn't allow an emotion escape those orange eyes. But the second Boulderpaw met his eyes, he could feel the disappointment.

It didn't last as Nightwing and Sunstar resumed their fight. Boulderpaw looked around, most of the fights were over, the few squabbles were being finished as Clan cats helped subdue the remaining cats. He watched curiously as some of the cats that had come with Nightwing were helping the Clan cats. *I'm sure there is a story behind that.*

But every cat was transfixed on the battle of the leaders. No cat attempted to intervene, and Boulderpaw was equally aware that this was strictly a leaders' battle of pride and strength. Silence was broken only by the grunts of the fighting warriors.

No words were exchanged and even Flickertail worked silently among the wounded, keeping one worried eye on the battle that captivated the attention of every other cat. Boulderpaw watched the big golden leader move deftly in front of the hard-muscled black cat he faced.

It was impressive the way Sunstar blocked the blows and returned with just as much force if not more. But the tenacity of Nightwing was probably more impressive, fighting so well even when he had no chance of victory. Even if he defeated Sunstar, he would not be getting out alive.

Raven, specifically, was crouched near her former leader with a dark expression in her eyes. Boulderpaw shivered as he looked at her, *she must have heard about Scorch*. The thought sent his heart pounding fearfully fast and he wondered if he'd faint as he swayed on his paws.

He focused on the battle again. It was drawing to a close, both were nearing the end of their strength. They paused for an instant their incessant attacks. Sunstar was badly wounded and scarlet blood stained the gold fur and dripped down on the snow like rose petals. Nightwing was no better, panting with his pelt shredded and dark red molting into his fur. But his brown eyes still glowed with unearthly fire.

"You're all fools," Nightwing snarled, swinging his head around at them. "Scorch is dead, you're all half-dead, and your leader is a deserter. I don't know what you hope to do after this, but Pinefur won't leave you be. I'll be gone, but he won't be! You're all going to be destroyed anyway!"

Sunstar growled, eyes glaring. "You'll pay for what you did to Scorch! That kit was innocent of anything malicious, and her blood is on your paws. I would think you'd hope for death."

Boulderpaw trembled. As horrified as he was at reality he didn't believe it. Some part of him couldn't accept it. He stared at his paws as the leaders leaped at each other, the final blow being decided. But nothing happened. No sound came, not even the crunch of paws against snow.

He looked up at the sky and the world was in colors of black and white. *What's going on?* He looked around, no cat was moving. The most disturbing was that Sunstar and Nightwing hung in the air, three mouse-lengths away from colliding.

He shook, was he going crazy after Scorch died? "No, don't worry. This isn't you," the voice was light and laughing. He jerked his head around and saw Sonya stepping across the snow. Her fur was white like snow and red like blood. It matched the surrounding battlefield.

Then he noticed something. A bit of color outside of Sonya. Nightwing's throat was dripping fire with blood even though the rest of his wounds were gray. His eyes drifted down to Sonya's paws that were both red.

He didn't comment, he didn't say anything at all. "Scorch is dead." His voice was hollow even to him.

Sonya dropped her head, "I am sorry." The voice was apologetic, but not very sorry.

It filled Boulderpaw with fury. "You knew! And you didn't tell me!" he accused.

"The last time I talked with you she was not dead. You would be happy to know she did not suffer very long. Her body was left on the trail that Nightwing came along, there is lavender along the way as well" Sonya dipped her head lower.

Boulderpaw trembled at the thought of the herb that was used to prepare the dead. It made it feel more real. "There is something I need you to do when you find Scorch's body," Sonya lifted her head, green eyes staring at him.

He shuddered. He swore she had had bright green eyes, but these eyes were dark green almost black, practically identical to Scorch's. It made it feel like he was talking to Scorch and urged him to listen. "What?"

Sonya came closer and whispered several instructions to him. "Do it all and have hope. I promise and tell nothing, but do this and do not allow any other cat to know about it."

Boulderpaw stared at her wide-mouthed and confused. "What will this do?"

"I cannot tell you. But you must do it." And Sonya turned and raced away, a blur that moved much to fast. And the colors faded back in and sounds flowed back along with movements around him. He blinked slowly and turned back to Sunstar and Nightwing. Sunstar took the leap and knocked Nightwing to the ground and raised his head for the killing bite, but the black leader was already dead. The wound on his neck flowing limply with blood.

Sunstar looked up and stared around confused. No other cat had noticed that he had not inflicted the wound. Or perhaps, Boulderpaw just did not notice who noticed. But he met Sunstar's frowning orange eyes and he shook his head knowingly. Sunstar nodded once and raised his head in a triumphant yowl.

Nightwing was dead and so was Crowpelt. Their enemies were defeated. The Clans had won. They were free again. And the last moon of hardship had finally born its sweet fruit. Cries and cheers erupted around her as the injured warriors leaped right into celebration.

Boulderpaw alone did not utter a sound of rejoicing. He turned immediately and raced along the track that Nightwing had come to them upon. It was easy enough to follow the well trodden path through the snowy forest. Just as the scent of blood had faded behind him, it reappeared in front of him and he ran faster.

He skidded as he came to the top of a little rise. A circle of untouched snow was ruined only by three pairs of paw-prints. Three pairs of pawprints and a wide trail of red snow. The sight of it, the smell of it. It overwhelmed him. It was too much blood to have come from such a small cat, wasn't it?

But the thing that sent the most shivers down his spine was that there was no body. Just a trail of red snow and paw prints twice the size of his own.

Chapter 36: Mystic Light

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Sounds rushed in and receded on tremulous waves. A constant elevation and lowering of incessant babble that flowed at inconsistent rhythms that could not possibly be pinpointed. The world rushed similarly; dark and cold to bright and warm swaying in breath-taking rushes.

No sights were seen, but they were heard. Too overpowering to bare the naked eye at, but not so bright that the ear bled. "Wake up, wake up now." The voice hummed like an inking black stain across the glorious chaos she was experiencing.

"Come on, Scorch. Wake up now." The sound of her name was the key and it all fell away.

Mumbling incoherently, Scorch tried to stand up only to find she was already standing. *Wasn't I lying on the ground? Wasn't I?* She shivered as she remembered. Nightwing's brown eyes, a gray sky, white snow... red snow. Did she die?

She struggled with her eyes to open and the addition of sight off balanced her and she stumbled around like a kit first trying out its legs. The colors gradually sank in and she retained her balance. Standing before her was a familiar fluffy white and ginger face.

"Sonya," she sighed, shoulders relaxing at the sight of her friend. But her tail twitched nervously. She had not forgotten what Song had told her.

"Scorch, it is good to see you again. Though I wish the circumstances were different." Sonya stepped forward and Scorch looked around. They were standing just off from the clearing where the horrific deed had been done.

Starlight illuminated it now, turning everything it touched pearly

white. But the shadows retained a fierce hold on the pine forest and drenched the surroundings in utter darkness. Only one thing was not white or black. A pool of red- frozen on the snow- stained the world with the memory of the murder.

Scorch turned and looked at it. She didn't know what to think. "Am I dead?" she thought she remembered dying, but then she'd fallen into the rush of the world.

"For all intents and purposes; you are dead." Scorch turned to look at Sonya, her breath catching and tears secreting.

"Why did this happen to me?" Her breath was coming short and even though she retained a calm demeanor toward Sonya she feared that she was panicking on the inside.

"I don't know. But it did happen," Sonya admitted and Scorch lifted her face to meet Sonya's sympathetic eyes.

"Your eyes are dark green again," Scorch mewed wondrously.

"Yes, and your eyes are bright green again. We are both in spirit form," Sonya explained. "I would not be able to talk to you any other way."

Scorch looked at her paws. Was she a ghost? There were no wounds on her paws or lower forelegs. And no ache emanated from her, the deadly wound she'd suffered on her neck was nonexistent. She stared down at her paws miserably, trying to keep the tears from flying. "I really am dead."

"Yes, about as dead as I am," Sonya mewed.

Scorch jerked her head up, "You died too?" she cried out.

Sonya flicked her tail, amusement flashing upon her face. "Remember a few nights ago when we spied on Crowpelt and Nightwing?"

Scorch remembered, but she didn't understand what that had to do with this.

"I essentially did something similar to that. The difference is that because of the powerful fear you were feeling when you were on the verge of death two things are different for you," Sonya mewed seriously.

"Yes?" Scorch was still confused, but it was calming her down.

"You will be able to remain in this state indefinitely, even when I return to my body- and as long as you are also in this state I can return to it whenever I wish. And two, you will be able to traverse the sky as well as the world in this state."

Scorch frowned, "What do you mean?"

"As I said, you are practically dead. As far as StarClan or any ancestors in the stars are concerned, you are dead and one of them."

Scorch's heart beat fast again. "So I *am* dead?" she wailed.

"Not quite!" Sonya soothed. "You *can* return to your body, same as me, however..."

"I can?! Then lets go!" Scorch bounced on her paws, anxious relief filling her.

"Wait! I'm not done telling you what you need to know!" Sonya hissed.

Scorch ignored her and raced over the snow toward camp. She skidded to a halt at the marsh that the camp was in. Brambles and churned up snow interrupted the peaceful landscape and blood and fur lay everywhere. "What happened?" she whispered to Sonya who had caught up.

"Today, soon after you died, the Clans fought the final battle against Nightwing," Sonya explained.

"And I missed it?" Scorch was kind of disappointed, but guiltily relieved.

"You are dead, you will be missing quite a lot of things," Sonya mewed crossly. "Now listen to me-"

"Lets talk later, come on!" Scorch raced over the snow, no snow stirring in her wake. She entered the camp and was not at all surprised to see the camp sitting in silent vigil. Her spirit filled with sorrow as she looked at the three cats being sat vigil for. Shadebreeze, Silverwing, and Cedarheart were all being mourned over.

Scorch picked her way carefully across the camp of mourners. Sunstar sat with his head bowed and eyes closed as he whispered no words. His pelt was badly torn up and messy with bandages. She could see Flickertail was checking up on all the remaining warriors and readjusting poultices; weariness dripped from his every move but his eyes glowed with exhausted strength.

Scorch felt frustrated that she wasn't even there to help with the wounded. She relaxed a little when she saw Jump and Mira sitting close together and Painted and Raven siting together not far away- all their eyes glazed with sadness. *But where is my body?* She had supposed that it would be here, but she did not see it. Another body she did not see was Boulderpaw, was he hurt? Had Crowpelt killed him?

New fear rushed through her, she looked around with a pensive frown but couldn't spot her gray coated friend. *He would be here if he were dead, right? But wait, I'm dead, shouldn't I be here? I can't go look for Boulderpaw until I find my body!*

"Would you please listen to me?" Sonya's whining growl caught her attention and she turned to see her standing behind her.

"Where's my body? More importantly, where's Boulderpaw?!" she demanded.

Sonya sighed, "I honestly have no idea. But Boulderpaw is alive. Now listen to what I have to say or you will not be able to return to your body. Ever."

That was enough for Scorch to hold her tongue and sit away from the mourners to hear Sonya out. "First off, you remember that we cannot be caught in the sun?"

Scorch nodded. "If you do, your spirit will- in some sense- become irreparable. It will no longer have the freedom we are experiencing. In other words, you will be unable to return to your body and be banished to the skies forever unless you have some special permission from StarClan or something."

"Why StarClan?" Scorch frowned.

Sonya sighed, "Not that it matters, but because StarClan has believers- or those that remember them- they have a few of the special abilities we have right now, and some we don't have. For example, they can appear to the strongest believers in daylight. Anyways, just don't be caught in the sun."

"What if its cloudy?" Scorch questioned.

"Clouds are fine, and shade is fine. You can just not be in direct sunlight. Though I would avoid even cloud and shade-filtered sunlight as much as possible regardless. It will gradually wear on your spirit even if it just barely touches you and will make it harder to do this in the future," Sonya was talking faster and Scorch was aware that it was nearing midnight.

"One more thing, you will be unable to return to your body the second you find it-"

"Why?"

"I'll tell you why. Because if you return to it in the same state that it was when you left it, you will still die for real. I was able to get you out of it just before you gave your final breath so your body is still capable of life. But it would continue dying if you went back to it in the condition it was in," Sonya mewed.

"Okay, I guess I understand that. I just need to heal my body?" Scorch frowned.

"There are a few things that prevent you from doing that. The spirit is not in your body, it will not be able to self-heal itself as living beings can. And you cannot actually touch physical objects unless you activate its spirit, and since you are your body's spirit- it won't

help that very much," Sonya's voice was becoming anxious.

"So there's nothing we can do?" Scorch asked.

"No, there is nothing *you* can do. But don't worry, I have already sent Boulderpaw with instructions to heal your body. He will not fail and I imagine that by tomorrow you will be able to return to it." But Sonya didn't look as confident as she sounded.

"You seem worried, should I be?" Scorch mumbled.

"I just didn't foresee your body being taken- I'm sure you noticed its not here. I don't know who or what took it or where it is. It could pose a deadly problem," Sonya murmured.

"What do you mean?" Scorch worried.

"Well, it if were a fox and it ate your body, there's no healing that. Or if it was one of Nightwing's cats and they buried your body somewhere secret or threw it in some water, Boulderpaw wouldn't be able to get to it. Just know that you're not out of the woods yet. You are still dead." Sonya watched her for a nod of agreement and

Scorch gave it.

She wondered how she should feel. But she didn't feel anything. She was too worried and anxious about too many different things. She didn't know whether to give up or have faith. Right now it felt like she was doing both.

"Scorch?" Sonya placed her tail on her shoulder hesitantly. "I don't think you should have to deal with the waiting. I can take you to a safe place while we wait for your body to be healed. I will go back to my body and find Boulderpaw and when we're done I will come get you to return. Will that be alright?"

Scorch looked up at her friend and nodded slowly. "I'd really like that."

"Excellent," Sonya purred, pulling her to her paws, they both headed out of the camp and into the woods.

Soon the scenery began to change. The snowy night forest blurred around them and wavered, as if they were looking at it from under water. Sonya ignored it and walked on steadily, her eyes focusing on nothing.

Scorch watched it was silent awe, stretching her head around to see above and behind them. It continued to change, glowing lighter as if it were being swallowed whole. And then the shapes hardened, no more wavering. Warm colors and soft lights decorated the scenery around them.

Scorch jumped as she realized that she was standing in sunlight. She looked with wide eyes at Sonya, but the she-kit just laughed-stepping into the sunlight herself. "This is a safe place. Its not the real world. Nothing can hurt you here," Sonya assured her.

Scorch nodded slowly and drew in the sights and sounds. "Where is this?" she asked in wonder.

"Hmm, good question. We're not in the real world, but not in the skies. I don't know exactly where, perhaps in between?" Sonya mused while Scorch started wandering around. The sparse forest they were in was in full leaf, unlike anything Scorch had ever seen. The grass was greener than green and the soft, lush leaves above her head were dimpled ivory gold.

She reached up to touch it, just to see if it were real. The leaf was velvety soft beneath her paw and it tingled coursing energy that filled and overflowed her with warmth. "It's incredible," she whispered, lowering her nose to the grass and fixating her eyes on a slow-moving ladybug.

"It really is, I think you'll enjoy your stay here more than you would back in the forest. You don't have to worry about your body here, but watch yourself carefully and try not to stray too far from here," Sonya warned.

"Alright, you want me to stay just in this little area?" Scorch asked, looking up from the bug she'd been patronizing.

"No," Sonya giggled, smiling broadly as she usually did. "Just stay

around *here*," and she lifted a trailing bough that had blocked a small arch. Scorch gasped and bounded over to the arch and stood staring out.

A brilliantly blue lake laid like a rippling sky just down a small hill that she stood upon. She could see near her beside the lake, a small waterfall cascading veils of rain down a pile of rocks into the water with a melodious tune. The beach near the lake was covered with glittering, gold sand and the small waves crashed with transparent beauty with white tips licking up the sand.

The other side of the lake was lost to the horizon and a small island jutted out half-way around to her left. With the breeze carrying half-recognizable scents along as it chased her tail around and breathed into her the spirit of recklessness.

"Stay by the lake and don't wander too far into the woods. It'll make it easier for me to find you if you stay here. Don't try to do anything, just have fun and don't worry! I'll take care of everything else," Sonya promised, laying her tail over her shoulders.

Scorch nodded, eyes drawn to the marvelous sight that fed her eyes as a feast. She barely realized when Sonya had left and she stood there staring, thinking she could watch it for forever.

.....

However, Scorch was still just a kit. And forever lasted only half the afternoon. By the time the sun was sinking down to her right, she was down on the beach- drawing figures in the sand with her claws.

She hummed as she created pictures that vaguely resembled cats. Her mind wandered with her gaze out to the lush water. Pushing herself to her paws, she went down to the waterline for the tenth time and looked out over the unreachable lake- eyes narrowing against the glare of the sun.

There's something strange here, but I don't know what it is. Thinking carefully, she couldn't decide. This place felt real, she could feel the grains of sand beneath her paws and the wind in her ears and the sun on her back. It smelled real, rich scents came from the forest

behind her and a cool, fishy taste came off the water. The water was cold and good and the prey she had caught was soft and warm. It certainly looked real, and the sounds of the waves and the calls of birds and the tiny rustlings in the forest were pure magic to her who had known only the cold silence of snow for so many days.

But something was off, something she just couldn't place in the beautiful world. It was pure paradise it seemed, she couldn't have wished for a more relaxing place to stay and play. But it was too perfect for her to be on her own.

Loneliness sank down on her heavily and she realized that she'd never actually been alone before. There had always been somewhere to go or someone to see. Now there was no where to go and no one to talk to but herself and the breeze.

Boredom is the prime suspect for breaking rules and Scorch didn't see anything wrong with exploring a little. As the sun sank like a fireball in the sky and the moon came out, a small halo of the sun in the purple-dusk sky, she started out into the forest.

The undergrowth was thick and few trails gave easy travel. It was a lot of backtracking and crisscrossing of trails to move forward. She yelped as- with the twilight darkness upon her- she stepped on a trailing thorn tendril. She hopped backwards and sat on the grass and leaves, licking the paw anxiously as her thoughts turned to wishing the future would come faster so that she could return to her body.

But there was no taste of blood and the pain soon faded. Scorch looked around quickly, suddenly chilled by the abrupt silence. Before she had gotten to her paws the scenery and light started to change rapidly. The trees shed their leaves and the sky rushed by with day and night mingling, slowing to become clouds. Snow had fallen unseen up to her belly and she shivered at the sudden cold.

She vaguely wondered if she had returned to her world by wandering away from the lake but she didn't recognize this place and no Clan scents hung in the forest. Looking around, she watched her breath puff out and decided to return to the lake so that she could wait for Sonya. Exploring no longer seemed to be a good idea.

Starting out, she stumbled on things that hadn't been there before and fumbled in the snow. It was as if the very landscape had been altered slightly and she wondered again if she was back in her own world. The lake appeared before her, gleaming in icy glory. She shivered in the open wind as she stepped down to the frozen shore and looked around with new eyes. Back in the familiar cold snow season, things looked a little more familiar. But not quite how she remembered them.

The lake was a mirror of the one back with the Clans, but the shorelines and the distant territories still looked different to her untrained eyes. *But I'm still alone*. Not even a day of being completely isolated was wearing on her and she looked around bleakly. With the cold snow reflecting her feelings, this paradise no longer seemed like paradise.

Since sitting here miserably was not very appealing and she was afraid of going back into the forest out of guilt for betraying Sonya's orders and worry about messing things up more, she turned down the shore and stared walking along it to see if she could find some shelter nearby.

Her ears twitched as she stopped suddenly. Her eyes scanned the area opposite of the lake shore. The forest laid behind her and an open expanse of moors opened familiarly bare. "Strange, I thought I heard something," she told no cat.

She paused and listened. "Now I know I heard something," she announced to herself. Veering off the shoreline, she turned into the abandoned hills. Her naive curiosity overcoming the cold as she stalked with lifted tail and pricked ears.

They twitched as the sound reached her again; a small kittenish squeak. Looking around, not a think disturbed the blinding white landscape of higher and lower lumps like large, round heads covered in snow. But the sound came again, carrying an element of pleasure in its inaudible tone.

A shiver swept through Scorch's belly, making its way along her spine and pricking up her furs. The sound was also familiar, while at the same time alien. Picking her way over the snow that held her

weight and left no sign of her passing, she gasped as nothing caught her step.

Tripping and subsequently falling, she slid on her stomach down the steep hill that snow had drifted against. Blinking bleary white snow out of her eyes, Scorch lifted her head and jumped in shock.

A pair of bright amber eyes stared down at her and a silly black face smiled at her. "Who are you?" the creature asked as Scorch scrambled and slipped on the snow.

"Um... uh..." Scorch tried to recover her pounding heart and scattered mind to accurately designate her position. A black kit was staring at her with head half-tilted and was about her size, but had fluffier looking fur and brighter eyes which made her look younger. The black kit was about as hidden in the snow as a tree on a bare hillside.

But Scorch brought herself back to look at those amber eyes. Bright and brilliant and untainted by any of the things Scorch had seen in her own short life. "My name is Wing," she told the other kit. Somehow she didn't feel it right to speak her name here, and Wing was the last cat she'd talked to besides Sonya and Nightwing.

"That's a nice name," the kit purred, bouncing closer. She reminded Scorch of Sonya, but it felt wrong on this kit- as if she should behave differently.

The kit was right in front of her now and Scorch leaned away from her, looking awkwardly at those twin amber eyes. "Do you live here?" the kit asked as Scorch didn't speak.

"No..." Scorch felt confused though she didn't know why. Something in her didn't understand this reality now. Probably because she hadn't thought this was a reality.

I thought this was a place like how the Clan cats made StarClan sound. But I don't see stars in her fur, so I don't think she's dead. So, where am I exactly? She wished Sonya were here to help explain things to her.

"So you're passing through? Why don't you come meet my family!

We've always lived here with a bunch of other cats, come on. They won't mind," the kit purred, putting her tail around Scorch's shoulders and pulling her along.

Other cats? Scorch wondered but didn't stop the kit from dragging her over the snowy moors. After all, where there were cats there was shelter. And she'd go back to the shore before long. She'd be there by the time Sonya came back.

Scorch looked around the white moor that was void of objects. "Is there anything out here?" she wondered out loud.

"Of course!" the kit looked back at her, snorting to herself. "There are lots of bushes and rocks, but with the cloudy skies its hard to see the shadows so its not as noticeable."

Scorch nodded and looked harder but only saw flat white that rose and fell in lazy, sloping fashion like immoveable waves. But a cat appeared in front of them out of nowhere and Scorch jumped, heart racing. The kit didn't blink though, releasing her grip on Scorch and bouncing over to the appeared cat who was a young orange tom with amber eyes that matched the kit's. In fact, on him, they looked more familiar. More steady and tranquil.

"Who are you?" he asked in a rough voice, not quite a growl but not friendly.

"Wing," she answered with her fake name as her guide bounced over to the tom.

"I found her wandering by the lake, Fish, and offered her to come visit us. She was all alone and-"

"That's enough," the tom cut her off sharply. "It was not your place to offer that to her. We cannot afford to feed another mouth right now, she should go."

Scorch opened her mouth to apologize. "You're quite right, she cannot stay with you. Come along now, Wing," she turned in surprise to see Sonya standing right behind her.

A greeting was on Scorch's lips but it died away quickly. She had

never seen a cat look as flustered and embarrassed and angry as Sonya did now. "Son-"

"Don't speak my name," her friend cut her off. "Now come here, quickly!" to the others, "I'm sorry to have disturbed you," she bowed her head.

Scorch turned to follow Sonya, she didn't know what was wrong but she didn't want to make it worse by fighting. But just before they disappeared from view, she turned back and looked at the two cats. They stood small and lonely in the snow. Her eyes met the tom's amber eyes for a moment. Confusion and questions were transmitted between them and were left unanswered as Sonya pulled her along.

"You shouldn't have done that!" Sonya hissed as she rushed along the empty land.

"What? What did I do?" Scorch asked, frowning slightly.

"Talk to another cat! Or leave the lake shore to start with," Sonya frowned deeply and the lines they created showed reproach rather than anger. "I told you not to leave the lake shore, why couldn't you do it?" Sonya paused to look at her.

Scorch looked at her paws, "Well, I was all alone and bored so I just went for a little walk and than it turned to winter so I looked for some shelter and..."

"And met those cats?"

"No, only the kit. The other cat came just before you did," Scorch corrected.

"Did you tell the kit anything?" Sonya pressed.

"Nothing... just that my name is Wing and that I don't live here."

Sonya sighed in relief, "Well, at least it was no worse. I didn't think you would meet any cat here since you were supposed to stay on the lake shore at that time but I guess I should have told you," the kit murmured.

"Told me what?" Scorch questioned anxiously, looking at Sonya with big, bright eyes.

"It doesn't matter anymore, your body is ready. Are you?" Sonya smiled and purred at her.

Scorch jumped and nodded excitedly. The tom and kit being pushed out of her mind by the thought of her friends and the Clans. "Right, follow me!" Sonya jumped into the air and Scorch followed her, the world transforming once again into a shivering bubble around them. It transformed much faster this time and by the time they landed- granted they seemed to be suspended in air for a moment- it was solid.

Familiar pines hung around them and the snow was dim and gray. But bright sunlight broke through some of the pine branches and illuminated the snow into brilliant, blinding whiteness. "What? Its daytime? It was night when I went for you..." Sonya murmured, frowning intensely with a confused look in her eyes.

"Okay," the kit turned to Scorch. "I'm going back to my body, but you follow in your spirit. Do not dare touch the sunlight, its reflecting off the snow and is stronger than usual; just touching it a little will mean its all over for you. I'll lead you to your body, but we should hurry or it will start decomposing," Sonya mewed, hurrying over to a snow-covered bush at the base of a pine tree.

"Decomposing?" Scorch padded after her.

"When a body is no longer living, it naturally begins to break down and become part of the soil. If you're gone too long it won't work properly anymore. But we're not at that point yet, especially since its been so cold, so don't worry. We just shouldn't delay any longer than we have to," Sonya mewed.

Scorch nodded and watched as Sonya's spirit reconnected with her body that was hidden in the bush. There was a slight flash as the two merged and then the eyes opened and they were bright green again. Sonya blinked, but her eyes didn't focus on Scorch and she knew she was invisible to her.

Sonya started moving forward along a trail of shadow that Scorch copied- dodging sun rays and sticking to the depths of darkness. She didn't recognize where they were before long though, outside of familiar ShadowClan or rogue territory.

Sonya stopped abruptly ahead of her and Scorch sat back on her haunches to avoid bumping into her. Sonya stood with her ears pricked and her nose to the wind, her eyes growing with apprehension.

What? Before Scorch had time to test the air herself Sonya was on the run and dashing dangerously close to the sunlight. Scorch followed best she could and before long Sonya had turned into a snowy clearing where sunlight pooled and dashed across toward a small tangle of tree roots and brier bushes.

Splatters of scarlet rain ran like fire over the pure white snow, staining it with the crimson horror. This was what Sonya had, inevitably, smelled and it gave Scorch a tight chest and a light head. Paws shacking, she stood still as Sonya raced into the tangled shelter.

Was Boulderpaw all right? The thought occupied her mind and she shifted her paws, starting to nervously edge forward in the shadows around the clearing. It was silent, not a breath pressured the air. But signs of a fierce fight were increasingly evident, broken branches, turned-up snow and frozen earth, and of course the bloody remains mixed with clumps of fur.

Scorch's ears pricked at Sonya's agonized howl. *That's it! I need to know what's happening!* Dashing around the clearing she skimped the shadows until she stood in front of the tangled den. The stench of blood penetrated her spirit nose and she went into the den.

Surprisingly it was longer than she had thought and patches of sunlight spied dangerously through the drafty cover. Sonya stood at the end in front of a collapsed gray bundle with her body in front of her. *First, I've got to get to my body.*

Expelling all other thoughts, she carefully tiptoed toward her body, breathing a sigh of relief as she passed the largest patches. Blinding

light flashed upon her and she felt herself stiffen. Eyes searching, they widened in horror as she saw bright sunlight shining down on her as a cat's ears were silhouetted above her. *Oh no!*

She turned to look at Sonya and she saw Sonya staring at her. She could be seen. *No!* Pushing through the stiffness she made a final leap for her body as it began to darken and she sank into a dizzying blackness.

Scorch never felt herself land.

Chapter 37: Still Breathing

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Pounding heartbeat; flowing paws; streaming tail; no air. Boulderpaw passed minute upon minute in a race against the trail he followed. The trickle of blood on the snow he covered in flying scores had tapered off but the footprints carried on steadily in an unfolding pattern that made his skin itch under his boiling wounds.

The sunset blazed red in front of him, but his eyes glared beneath its fiery ribbons and focused solely upon what he was seeking out. *Scorch... Scorch... Scorch... where are you?* The scent on the snow was dead, the cold had gotten to it before him. Nothing but the carefully paced paw-prints remained for him to tail.

The repose of night descended on the forest as he entered into unfamiliar territory but he didn't let up. Exhaustion burned out in his muscles until they felt cold in their hurried lengthening and shortening strides. His breath hung in puffs behind him, too slow to freeze to him as the wind tore his breath out of his mouth.

"Find Scorch-"

Images flashed behind his eyes.

"Do this for her-"

Sonya's voice was nagging and sweet and it blistered his anger. She seemed to know everything, why not help Scorch herself? Why even let this happen? Why let Scorch die?

No! He savagely snapped at himself. If she were really dead, *Sonya wouldn't instruct me to heal Scorch's wounds. She must just be close to death, Crowpelt and Nightwing were wrong. I need to hurry up!* He pushed his numb paws harder, ignoring the cold that invaded even his burning energy.

He didn't see the tangle of roots in the moonlight shadows as he tripped and flew through the air. His paws missed the ground and he hit the snow so cold and hard that it tore at his fur with crystalline softness. He laid there panting for a moment, gathering his thoughts that had been shorn down to the bare numbness of emotion.

Looking up, he could see the stars smiling down on him. Smiling with that sardonic iciness they reserved just for him. Scowling back at them, he rolled around on his back- too tired to get to his paws. He saw that he was in a circular clearing where the pines mixed with oaks and maples. The familiar trees weren't very homely looking without laughing leaves to dress them up.

Ferns and briars were abundant over here and crowded around one oak tree in particular, reaching up to constrict and choke the tree trunk. He blinked once, and again. He could smell Scorch and he was sure he wasn't imagining it.

Looking around the starlit clearing, the shadows hunted close to him but couldn't get close enough to pounce as he investigated the scent on wobbling legs. A slight shifting sound drew his attention over to the briars.

Peering into the thick tangle of dark stems that loomed in the second-hand nightlight, he thought he could make out something. *A paw?* It took three more seconds to realize it was Scorch lying trapped on a cushion of broken briar stems that poked mercilessly into the limp body.

Shock filled him as he saw Scorch laying there so motionless. So soundless. He tried to reach into the briar bush but she was too far back and he anxiously looked and found a rabbit tunnel in the briar patch. It was a tight squeeze until it closed off from his entirely not far away from Scorch.

Hissing and backing away with half his pelt stolen by the greedy twigs, he glared at this bush as his fear and anxiety worked as an energy maker. And a reckless decision maker. "Hold on, Scorch. I'm coming." He called out in vain. He sensed she wouldn't answer, but he still talked to her.

"Ouch! How can you stand this? You have my respect to tolerate this in silence!" he babbled as he climbed on top of the briar bushes. The thin sticks broke but there were enough of them that he didn't sink past his his carpals. Struggling to lift his paws and put them back down, he hissed as he received countless scratches to decorate his paws.

But he did it; he made it to Scorch and he leaned down to grab her scruff. She was colder than ice and stiffer than it too. Somehow he managed to drag her all the way back and leap down into the ice-covered snow clearing.

Panting, he let Scorch slump onto the ground and sat back on his hindquarters. "Well, that was hard." he glanced at Scorch quick before dropping his eyes and staring at his paws.

He sat listening for a sigh of relief from her, a murmur of thanks warmer than the laugh of the sun like she always did when he helped her. But it seemed her breath was still, she was holding it in and he couldn't bear it.

He didn't want to. But he had to.

He rolled Scorch onto her back. Her paws falling limply around her and her chest didn't rise. *"Don't be afraid at what you see. It is just an illusion."* That was what Sonya had told him. How could this not be an illusion? How could it be an illusion?

He leaned down, held his ear over where he knew Scorch's heart would beat. It would thrum lightly, just barely quivering, begging and pleading for help to explode to a drum of thunder. He held his breath and listened.

It was silent.

The tears were out before he could stop them. "No! No! No!" he flew into a confused rage. He paws banged down and indented the icy snow while his curses and rants ravaged the night breeze and beat it into submission until it cowered to be silent and still. And those damn stars just kept on smiling and winking.

"Oh, shut up!" he screeched up at those millions of distant trick-lights that chuckled over things as simple as death as they sat on their high thrones of sky and cloud.

His tears had burned up and he sniffed, looking sadly back at Scorch as the rage melted into sadness. Her eyes were closed and a troubled look was pressed cold on her face as if she were just having a troubling dream. But her mouth hung open, reaching as if to lap at water. Blood was still trickling out of her empty veins.

He sat near her and ran his paw in melancholy over her fluffy, lifeless fur. It was obvious that the wound at her throat was what had killed her. A frozen bloody mess it was, the blood turned almost black on her red fur as a thin gleam of fresh blood trickled out over the old.

But it was also apparent that her suffering had not been a quick, clean death. Her front paws were so torn up that his own scratched ones that stung like a dozen bees had stung them looked like he had been running over a grassy meadow. Several bruises and claw marks dotted her small body and he battled with sadness and wrath in the depths of his belly.

Would the sun rise the next morning? He thought it wouldn't as the moon slowly descended and he sat in silent vigil. It would make much more sense if the world were left in perpetual night without even the moon to lift their eyes to. It didn't matter anymore though. For three moons Scorch had dominated his life, for five she had been in it. That was more than half the time he'd been alive. Life could never be the same now.

He glanced at the briar bush, its thin skeleton fingers reaching out in every direction. For the first time he wondered why Scorch had been in a briar bush in the first place. *I didn't catch the scent of another cat. But I could have missed it in the cold. But why toss a corpse in a briar patch? Why carry it so far and abandon it?* He didn't understand and it perturbed him more than his lifeless friend laying by him.

"Boulderpaw!" A surprised squeak burst him out of his brooding and he looked over his shoulder and saw Sonya hurrying over to him

with wide eyes.

"Stay away!" he snarled, jumping in front of Scorch and hissing at her.

"We have to help Scorch now!" Sonya protested, faltering to a stop.

"Its too late!" he growled, the fur along his spine lifting.

"Why?"

"She's dead!" he yelled.

Sonya sighed, "I told you before, right? Not to believe your eyes?"

"Then what am I supposed to believe?!" he burst out, frustrated and scared and sad and mad.

Sonya met his eyes, bright green pouring into him. "Believe in Scorch."

Boulderpaw laid his ears back flat. "How can I when she left me? She's gone!" he shouted again and his voice traveled deep into the forest, chilling the hearts of the sleeping animals before it faded as a brief nightmare.

Sonya stepped closer and he didn't wait again to leap at her. Not unlike the day before, he tackled her and pinned the white and ginger kit to the ground. "Its your fault! I know you knew about Scorch, you seem to know about everything! You could have helped her!"

Sonya stared up at him and her eyes were silent. "And who would any cat be if they were always being helped?" the kit whispered.

"But Scorch is just a kit! She shouldn't have to be defending her life- I told you all this before," he broke off.

"And I told you before Scorch is much more than you see," Sonya snapped back.

"If she were all that then she wouldn't have been killed!"

"If you would quit being ridiculous we could save her!" Sonya hissed, suddenly hostile.

Boulderpaw backed away at the savage edge in her voice. "What do you mean 'save'? She's dead, there's nothing to do," his voice cracked at the end.

"I told you not to believe it, didn't I?" Sonya asked, getting up and padding over to Scorch's motionless body. "Scorch is not quite like normal cats..."

Boulerpaw shivered down his spine. He knew Scorch was different, but Sonya made her sound like an entirely different creature. "How is she different? Her blood is still red and her heart still needs to beat to live."

Sonya purred, " It is not her *body* that is different."

Boulderpaw didn't understand but watched as Sonya started licking Scorch's wounds clean. He didn't speak again as he silently crouched down and helped her groom Scorch's fur, rubbing snow in the fur clumped with dried blood until it came loose and soft.

Morning light was softening the sky when they finished grooming Scorch's frozen body. "We need to get her in some kind of shelter..." Sonya looked around, frowning.

"The briar over there?" he suggested, looking at the briar tunnel he had crawled through trying to get Scorch.

"It looks pretty small..."

"I can expand it quickly," he snapped.

Sonya nodded, "Okay, you do that while I finish binding Scorch's wounds. I'll need to find a lot of cobwebs though." Boulderpaw turned away as the she-kit started wandering around, looking in fallen trunks and in dead bushes.

Boulderpaw set to work, dreading to go to sleep because it seemed like a resting paradise that would soon turn to a horror story. First he pushed back the briar brushes on the sides so that two cats could

walk through at once. He ignored the cuts on his soft paw pads.

He continued that until the end where he had been turned back. Then he worked on the roof; when he had pushed the bushes back the top had sagged in. To fix it, he pulled the top briars tight at the edges and strengthened them on the sides rather than in the middle.

Finally he had a long, low tunnel that would be easy to defend by pulling layer after layer of briar down and then jumping up on the tree that it was near. He frowned as he remembered Scorch teaching him this clever strategy for a den. *But Sonya may not be crazy, there might be a way to bring her back!*

He peered up at the roof, the dusty sage-yellow light was glimpsing through a few gaps and holes but he shrugged. He could stuff them later with dried leaves if he was staying here long. How much shelter did a corpse need anyways?

His chest grew tight again.

"Boulderpaw!" he left the den at Sonya's call and stalked silently over to the kit that stood over the now cobweb-bound Scorch. He pricked his ears in feign hope. But no breath stirred Scorch's whiskers.

His eyes gleaned off the tightly wrapped throat and the paws that were covered with the white, sticky substance. She still looked a little too small and a little too lifeless. "She's still dead."

Sonya sent him a scathing look. "I won't explain it to you. What I need you to do now is move her into the den and keep her out of the sunlight. We need to gather food and water; tonight I'll bring Scorch back, alright?"

Boulderpaw remained silent, he still didn't understand. But he didn't care and a part of him grasped desperately at any chance- no matter how impossible- that Scorch would open those dark green fathomless eyes of hers.

He carefully pulled Scorch over to the briar tunnel and took her to the very back of the den. "Make a nest so that she's comfortable,"

Sonya commented behind him.

He was mutinous for a moment as he curled a bit of Scorch's fur around his claw. Her fur was the neatest it had ever been and she wasn't even here to see it. "What's the point if she's dead?" with the spine chilling horror dispelled, the best and most respectful thing seemed to be to bring her back to camp and give her a proper burial. To make it seem like she was alive and coming back was nearly revolting to him.

He flinched as Sonya's tail wrapped around his shoulders. "I can't imagine how you're feeling right now, but I need you to trust me just until tomorrow morning. Give me just that long."

The gray tom looked up into those bright eyes that were starkly opposite of Scorch's gentle, soothing ones. These were full of inexhaustible energy and opportunity. The irony of it was that the fire was less strong in Sonya's eyes than those that were lost in darkness.

He had known from the moment he saw her that she had never seen hope the way Scorch was enveloped in it.

"I'll trust you," he growled, turning his face away. He simply couldn't give up on Scorch just yet, even if the words of a suffocated young soul were all he had to hang onto. "But if there's no change by tomorrow morning I'm burying her." His voice was nonnegotiable and Sonya dipped her head respectfully.

"Alright, tomorrow morning it is."

The day went fast from there; Boulderpaw spent the better part of the remaining morning building the softest nest he could around Scorch. Building her up on the driest, softest moss he could gather; all the feathers he could find; and clumps of his and her fur that he cleaned off the briar bush.

While doing this he noticed a snag of black fur in the briar bush and became convinced one of Nightwing's cats had been the despicable cat to desecrate Scorch's corpse.

Then the former ThunderClan apprentice hunted a few pieces of prey and gathered a clump of snow in a rock shell for food and water as Sonya had asked. But his pelt itched when he saw Sonya dozing in the sunny clearing when she obviously wasn't the one who had been fighting a battle yesterday.

All his muscles screamed at him whenever he called on them to work and the wounds were burning and itchy- only anger and fear kept him moving in moody action. He rolled in the snow more than once to soothe his wounds and he was wise enough to see that they were starting to become infected from the way they were turning purplish and starting to hurt like a bruise at the touch.

At last he was done as the sun lowered behind the tops of the pine trees. Laying half in and half out of the briar tunnel he collapsed on his stomach with a groan as the fire in his muscles blistered and then ran away.

"You worked really hard today," Sonya's voice was impressed. He grunted and muttered incoherent words, his eyes closed against the cat who irked him. "Here," Sonya's voice was suddenly accompanied by a sweet and intoxicating scent.

His eyes snapped open unconsciously and his mouth watered at the site of two fresh mice and a sweet green herb. "Where did you get catmint?" he was already gulping down a mouse and munching on a leaf while his mouth continued watering as the juices filled him with nepenthe.

The gray tom sighed and closed his eyes in contentment. For a moment he could sit and breathe and forget for a fraction of eternity all that was wrong that had happened, that was wrong now, and that would be wrong in the future.

Eating the second mouse, he wondered when Sonya had time to go hunting and find the rare herbs. The blue-eyed tom hadn't gone far from the clearing where they'd situated themselves and he was sure Sonya had never moved. *Oh well, its not like Scorch ever did something I didn't understand.*

He gave a long sigh of contentment as he picked clean the last

bones of the mice. "I wish my wounds didn't sting so much," with his belly taken care of he could complain more openly.

Sonya peered and looked at the numerable yellow-scabbed wounds. "Those look like they hurt," she mewed sympathetically but didn't offer anything. Boulderpaw remembered that she didn't know herbs like Scorch did. He froze, had he just been comparing Sonya to Scorch? For a moment there he had thought he was talking to Scorch.

He looked away, uncomfortable and feeling guilty, but still determined to do something for his aches. "I don't suppose you could help me clean them out with snow?"

And so began a scrubbing of wounds with pawfulls of snow that took away the remaining afternoon and caused his wounds to start bleeding several times. But he gritted his teeth and bore it; cleaning them was the only way he knew to prevent any worse infection.

"I'm glad that's done," Sonya leaned back on her haunches and blew out through her lips.

"I'm more glad!" Boulderpaw snorted, he felt as if he had been dragged through a forest of stone and back again. He was surprised he had any fur left on him at all and he scanned his pelt- worried that they'd scrubbed so hard that the fur wouldn't grow back.

"Look at that, its almost sunset." Boulderpaw looked up at Sonya's words. It was true, night was approaching and the clear blue sky was quickly being spread over with red, orange, and golden ribbons. The shadows hung heavy in the pine trees and the chatter of birds was decreasing while night owls started their own melancholy tune.

"Well," Sonya got up with a sudden sigh. "I'll be leaving now, hopefully when I'll come back Scorch will come back."

"Hopefully?"

"I can't promise anything, that's why I didn't. But I'm going to try," Sonya met his eyes and for the first time the distinguished fire in

her eyes rose into a leaping, flickering flame.

He watched in silence as Sonya started away. "I'll try to be back before morning. Don't do anything while I'm gone, just rest and recover." His tail flicked irritably at being given orders by a cat younger than him but he kept up his complacent composure and decided to enjoy the hygge he found himself given.

Stepping back into the briar tunnel he watched the light show of sundown with all its dying glory until night spread like an inky pelt freckled with silver hairs and one half-closed eye. Dreariness rained down on him but the chilly silence of Scorch's corpse didn't allow him to rest easy as he stayed close to the end of the tunnel where the air nipped and snacked on his exposed skin.

Without any other cats around to distract or blame, guilt came in fidgeting waves that poked and clawed at him. If he hadn't let Crowpelt get away with Scorch, this wouldn't be happening. If he hadn't let her go off on her own Crowpelt wouldn't have been able to get to her. If he hadn't gone back to camp and instead had went to save her, this wouldn't be happening.

So many thoughts. So many regrets.

He fell into a fitful sleep until the morning dawned upon a clear sky. The rays of pale honey-light cracking and breaking the sheet of darkness such as a sheet of ice cracks and breaks with water. Overtaking, over-washing.

Boulderpaw didn't know what woke him, perhaps just the nightmares that plagued him. Or the change of forest music as starlings began their loud songs to be followed by the chatter of jays and then the chirps of sparrows and finches. In any case, he threw his noctuary out with the rest of the awful memories from yesterday. He needed to make room for the ones that were coming today.

The patchy tunnel showed glimpses of sky and tree and the cold air barely being insulated out of the tunnel. He shivered and rolled ever, feeling sick to his stomach as he saw Scorch's still carcass. The chilling scent of death flowing even stronger than usual.

Looking away he watched the flitting black silhouettes of birds in the sky above him. Sonya said she'd be back by now... He lifted his nose to the air and drank in the cold morning air but there was no cat scent at all besides his own. Not even a trace of Sonya's from yesterday. *I guess the cold killed it.*

He got up and stretched, looking forlornly at Scorch's body like an abashed wanderer. *I did say that if there was no change by now I'd bury her; Sonya was just pulling my heart this whole time.* Steeling his nerves, he went over to Scorch and very gently placed his ear to her chest with no hope. His hopeless heart was answered with silence and he sighed.

I'll give you your rest. Turning out of the tunnel back into the clearing he went to the middle and started pawing at the snow and ice. Since the clearing got more light, he hoped that there wouldn't be quite as much snow where there was more light but the result was an icy hard surface a claw-length deep because of constant melting and refreezing.

His paws were bleeding by the time he got a small patch cleared down to the dirt and the sun was rising through the higher branches of the endless pines. He sat back to catch his breath and looked at his shadow that loomed over the hole. Odd, it was bigger than he would have thought.

The blow that came was half-expected and he ducked his head, avoiding the worst of what would have been a knock-out hit. Darting forward and spinning on his tail with just an added nip to his spine, he was met with a stinging blow to his jaw that had both cutting speed and bruising strength.

Fear rose as he quickly realized this was not going to be an enemy he could beat. With the sun glaring in his narrowed eyes, he was almost instantly overwhelmed by a fluffy of blows from his unidentified opponent- so fast that he couldn't see them coming and just barely blocked some of the worst with his terse nerves.

And they weren't playful jabs either. The blows that he kept stopping within an inch of him were deadly ones. He would slip up soon enough. He screeched a call to the wind but not a thing

answered him except a growl from his attacker who bowled into him with sudden speed that knocked the wind out of his stomach as he tumbled back across the clearing into a dead fern bush.

Screeching in fury he shook the dead twigs off and raced at the intruder with renewed fury. He had just recognized her. Those amber eyes that had so carefully hidden and than so clearly shown what a despicable, algolangia, sadist she was.

She was clearly not expecting him to use such speed and force as his paws kicked up riffs in the icy snow and slammed into her while her paws slipped on the snow. *Amelia!* He hissed and dug his claws into her. She had tried to kill his Scorch once!

But his attacks were futile as he spread a few scarlet drops of hers around the clearing. She pried him off her and knocked him to the ground, pinning his chest to the snow as she dug her claws into his preexisting wounds. It was agony and he hissed against the heart-stopping pain as blood began to flow and pool in the shallow hole he had dug.

"What are you doing, worm?" Amelia's wet voice slurred in his ear.

"Trying not to die." He gasped as Amelia's claws gripped tighter.

"I mean with Scorch! Why are you healing a dead cat?"

"I was trying to bury her!" he protested.

"Why the cobwebs then?"

"Her friend is crazy!" he flipped himself over, exposing his belly for a brief moment but had fast enough reflexes to block a killing blow. With the corrosive strength that came from desperation, he landed a flashing blow to Amelia's head and- in her pause for recovery- limped for the briar tunnel as the gilded sunlight blinded him.

Blood was flowing out of him so fast that he was sure it was worse than all the wounds he had received in the battle the other day. Why did he feel so cold? He didn't remember the tunnel being so green and yellow. Part of him remembered and tried to close the briar tunnel- though he only succeeded in making the entrance

smaller. But it was enough to stall Amelia as she hissed and turned away toward the tree to try another approach.

He stumbled down the tunnel, blood soaking into his fur. His heart was beating so fast and he felt so hot... he licked his lips, anxious for water. He didn't make a sound as his paws hit something and he rolled over a lump of fur. He knew it was Scorch's body, but he couldn't even react in his mind.

Closing his eyes, he thought he heard the panicked voice of Sonya and the rustling of Amelia somewhere over his head. Was there another cat here? He didn't hear or smell anything but he sensed another warmth present. He cracked his eyes open and saw Sonya looking aghast above him.

But she wasn't looking at him. He followed her gaze over the lump of Scorch's body. He could see Amelia on the top of the tunnel, pulling the covering back and letting in a flow of sunlight. He then saw what had caught Sonya's attention.

There in the puddle of sunlight was a quavery, barely transparent shadow of Scorch. Those dark green eyes that filled his hungering soul instantly were wide and terrified but had that earnestly determined blaze that was so familiar to him.

But how was Scorch *here* and *there?*

The shadow Scorch leaped out of the sunlight, becoming less visible but still clearly there as she leaped toward her body. A slight haze formed and then there was a flash.

Boulderpaw couldn't stay awake and fell into the recluse of sleep.

Chapter 38: Drifting

Chapter 38: Drifting

"Is she alright?"

"No, there's something wrong with her."

"Why won't she wake up?"

"I don't know! We should just wait and be patient."

A young tom and a she-kit's voice hovered over Scorch's senses. She felt... nothing. Suspended in temperance and frothing clouds, she couldn't control her body or mind. But a nagging force of chilliness pulled her down and she sank beneath the nonchalant atmosphere to the thickness of reality that pulled and clawed at her ravenously.

A splash of water swept over her, burning as it entered her nose and she sprang up, choking and spluttering. Her eyes opened and blinked the water painfully away. All her memories rushed back in a painful pang; the tunnel, the silhouette, the sunlight... She turned and looked at her two saviors which she assumed were Sonya and Boulderpaw.

Instead, she was greeted by a black she-kit and an orange tom with hard, amber eyes. *What?* Scorch swayed as she stood, staring at them for a moment. They looked familiar, she knew she'd seen them. When? Where?

"A 'thank you' would be appropriate," the orange tom growled after a few moments of silence.

Scorch blinked, his voice instantly bringing her back to these two cats. They were the cats she'd met at the place Sonya had taken her. But what were they doing here? She hadn't returned to this place, had she? She couldn't have- since she didn't know how. *Is this because I was touched by sunlight? No... Sonya said I'd go to StarClan,*

and this isn't that.

"What happened?" Scorch asked the two cats warily.

"We was hoping that you could tell us!" the black kit squeaked. "I haven't seen you in days, Wing!"

"Its been nearly half-a-moon, to be more precise. I'd thought we'd seen the last of you," the orange tom added.

Half a moon? It hasn't been that long... Scorch frowned deeply. "But it was just-" she broke off. Sonya had warned her not to talk to cats here. She wasn't sure why, but she sensed there was an important reason. At least not to say anything odd.

"We found you collapsed in the snow on the shore, your heart wasn't beating and you were barely breathing, we tried splashing you with water but I didn't think it would work." The orange tom grunted, amber eyes staring at her silently.

"But it did!" the black kit chirped happily, shuffling around in the snow.

"Hey, quit that," the tom scolded the kit as she sprayed them with snow.

"Okay!" the kit sat down obediently, but jumped up a moment later to pounce on some drifting snowflakes.

Scorch watched them in silence, thinking deeply. *If I'm here, what does that mean? Am I dead or not?* Beyond that, she couldn't get past how real this world felt. The cold wind ruffled her fur and froze her skin, and she could feel the snowflakes falling and melting on her fur as her breath blew chilled clouds into the air.

"Although I'm not really for it, I can't leave you out here again. I'm sure you'd be welcomed at our home until the snow passes," the orange tom's voice snapped her back. He looked resigned as he held the black kit in place by putting a paw over her tail.

"Yay! Wing is coming back home with us!" the kit cheered happily, amber eyes glowing.

Scorch nodded slowly. Whether she was dead or not- she was cold here, and hungry. Her first priority was taking care of her physical needs, then figuring out what was happening to her. "Thank you, I will come with you."

The two strange cats nodded and they started leading her back into the white, expressionless hills. She followed them quietly, her paws whispering over the snow but she noticed that they did leave a trail that was soon lost in the wind and snow.

"You never told me your names," she spoke up suddenly.

The black kit looked at her with wide amber eyes. "Oh my goodness! You are right! Go on, Jasper, tell her your name," the kit nudged the orange tom who rolled his amber eyes.

"I'm Jasper," he introduced himself with a slight drawl in his words that pricked familiarly to her sensitive ears.

"Are you from the mountains?" she asked curiously, it sounded an awful lot like her mother's accent that he'd used just now, but somehow different.

"No," he snorted. "What are mountains? I've only ever lived here like my parents and their parents, and the parents of those before them."

"Oh," Scorch fell into silence again.

"Aren't you going to ask my name?" the black kit asked after a while, looking hurt.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Yes, what is your name?" Scorch asked sweetly. Even though she and the black kit were about the same size, she felt like she was closer to the orange tom's age than the kit's. The orange tom looked like he was around Boulderpaw's age, maybe a little younger. He was just as tall as her friend but not nearly as wide in the shoulders, it gave him a lankier look than Boulderpaw's muscular build.

"My name is-" the wind tore the words away and Scorch blinked as a sudden whirl of wind enveloped her, screening her off from her

guides as she was twirled around and around mid-air. Black swallowed her vision as the wind raced away and she felt herself falling.

Scorch didn't hit the ground. She opened her eyes.

"Scorch!" an instant cheer split her ears and she cringed as two much more familiar cats crowded around her.

The red and black kit watched in strange fascination as Sonya purred and wiped tears from her eyes and Boulderpaw sat with his back to her with his shoulders shaking. "Sonya... Boulderpaw..." her voice was distant and almost a whisper.

She blinked again. What had she been going to say? The words had been right there, but had frozen somewhere between her heart and mouth. Her thoughts ran on their own, taking her back to the barren snowland she had been a moment before.

"I was so worried when you touched the sun- I didn't think you were going to make it! But here you are- and, oh!- I'm just so happy!" Sonya chattered with fresh tears replacing the ones she'd wiped away.

"Its okay," Scorch mewed hesitantly as Sonya flopped on her belly and started sobbing. Awkwardly, she rubbed her paw over Sonya's shoulder to comfort her friend. "I'm sorry to have made you worry," she offered the crying she-kit.

"Well you should be!" Sonya looked up with tears streaming down her face. "If you had died- if you had- if you," Sonya continued sobbing for several more minutes until all the fear, sadness, anxiety, and relief had been wrested from her.

Sonya sat up and sniffed, "I'm better now."

Scorch looked at Boulderpaw curiously. He was watching her with narrowed eyes. She couldn't read them, but she sensed a chill emptiness from him. He felt exactly like she did, but she didn't know what was missing from either of them. She lifted up a cobweb bound paw and noticed it trembled just the tiniest bit as if it were

under an increasing strain.

"What's the matter, Boulderpaw?" she asked quietly as Sonya sighed into silence.

"Nothing, I just didn't think you'd actually come back." Boulderpaw's voice was low and quiet, but it held a storm.

Scorch fell silent. She didn't want to press. But something told her Boulderpaw was waiting for her to ask. She opened her mouth again but no words came out and she let her eyes drop. Something didn't feel right with this reality.

"Now, you eat, quickly, but be careful! We don't want your wounds to start bleeding or there will be trouble. We've got some water for you here, too." Sonya pushed some prey over to her and Scorch nodded and started eating, blinking at the bland taste that filled her. As she lapped the water she noticed the holes in the briar den they were sitting in.

"Did something happen?" she asked, distantly recalling the battle-torn clearing.

Boulderpaw's eyes lit up, but not with happiness. "Amelia was here," he growled.

"Oh?" Scorch didn't look up.

"Yes, she was the one who pulled the top back and let the sunlight touch you," Sonya's voice was suddenly icy-cold.

"Where is she now?" Scorch asked.

"I don't know, but she's gone. I should have killed her," Sonya growled.

Boulderpaw was looking at Sonya with a respect in his eyes and a little bit of wariness; but Scorch couldn't rouse much curiosity. "Were you hurt?" Scorch looked at the two cats. She had noticed Boulderpaw's bandages but she'd assumed that it was from the battle to defeat Nightwing.

"Boulderpaw was, but he's fine. I put cobwebs and bound them nice and tight," Sonya nodded.

"Did you put any herbs on?"

Sonya looked crestfallen. "No... I didn't know..."

"Horsetail is best, but its probably not going to be found; you could look for tormentil instead," Scorch suggested.

Sonya lit up. "I know what tormentil is! Its got purple flowers, right?!"

Scorch twitched her tail awkwardly, "No, that's mallow. Which can also be used for wounds, but it probably won't be found this late in the season. Tormentil has yellow flowers, kind of like a daisy."

Sonya nodded, not insulted at all. "Okay! I'll be back soon! We can use some on you too!"

Scorch watched her turn away and had a thought. "Bring some poppy seeds back!" Sonya waved her tail to show she had heard before vanishing out of the den leaving Scorch alone with Boulderpaw.

"Are you okay, Scorch?" Boulderpaw asked after awhile.

She nodded, "My throat hurts and my legs ache, but I'm okay."

"Well, that's good. Considering I was pretty sure you were dead," Boulderpaw stood up and looked up at the covering. "Come to think of it... how did you come back? You didn't have a heartbeat or anything. And not just for a few seconds, its been two days."

Now she saw where he'd been getting at the whole time. "I don't know how. I just am."

"Well, you're back at least. I guess I should be grateful for that," Boulderpaw frowned and turned away. "I'm going to stand guard."

"To watch for Amelia?"

"No, that cat won't be doing anything for a long while now." He gave a wry smile. "Your friend is quite skilled, I didn't even see her move and Amelia was suddenly all torn up, just like with-" he broke off abruptly. "I'll be within calling distance."

Scorch laid her heavy head down and listened to his footsteps traverse down the long den. She curled up, shivering slightly at her own coldness. She'd already noticed. Holding her paw up she pressed it to her face, it was as cold as her breath and she shivered down to her bones. Perhaps it was the result of her having left her body in the cold for so long. But this coldness went deeper.

Her feelings were frozen too.

As she tried to make herself warm, her mind drifted to Jasper and the black kit. She had been warm there. She had felt alive there, her feelings flowing freely there. Where was there? Could she go back? Scorch fell to longing for it as she had once longed for sleep as an escape from this world.

"Okay! I'm back!" Scorch was almost sorry to hear Sonya's quirky voice. She'd just been imagining Jasper's amber eyes, almost recognizing who they reminded her of. She didn't even feel guilty at the thought of being annoyed by Sonya. But she didn't feel annoyed, it was just a thought.

The black and red kit gave the herbs Sonya had brought back a quick look and nodded in approval at the yellow flowered herbs. "I've got the tormentil!" Sonya purred.

"Actually, that's marigold," Scorch mewed, sitting up slowly-mindful of her wounds.

"Oh..." Sonya's excitement dissipated.

"Its alright. Marigold is just as good, if not better. I just didn't think there were any patches left."

"They look alike..." Sonya defended herself.

"Kind of, they're both yellow. But tormentil had more of a flowery look to it," Scorch explained.

Sonya listened diligently and then called Boulderpaw in. "Help me with Scorch's wounds," Sonya ordered.

"Its alright, Boulderpaw can go first. We can't move the bandage on my neck yet and my paws don't hurt that much." Scorch offered. She didn't want to be the center of attention right now.

Sonya nodded. "Fine, stand up straight, Boulderpaw. And don't you get up to help, Scorch. Stay right where you are," Sonya ordered.

Scorch hadn't been going to move. She curled down and watched through slitted eyes as Sonya clumsily took the cobwebs off Boulderpaw and put the leaves on before trying to wrap his wounds up again.

"That won't help much. You need to rub the marigold juice in his wounds and then put the cobwebs back on," Scorch mewed.

"Okay!" Sonya eagerly set into rubbing the juice roughly- and probably painfully- into Boulderpaw's wounds. But he didn't complain, his blue eyes on her the entire time.

"Alright! Your turn, Scorch!" Sonya turned to her with marigold-stained paws.

Scorch obediently gave her paws to be taken care of and didn't try to be a part of or even listen to what Sonya said. Her thoughts were elsewhere, stuck unwittingly on that other world that had seemed so real to her.

"All done!" Sonya purred as she wrapped the paws in fresh cobwebs. Scorch pulled her paws closer to her and didn't speak. "Are you sure you're okay?" Sonya's voice lowered.

Scorch looked up blankly at Sonya's worried eyes. It was obvious she wasn't acting like herself, but she didn't feel like she was acting weird- she was just indulging herself as always. It was just in a different way right now. "No, I'm alright."

Sonya looked at her for a moment longer before dipping her head. "Alright, if you say so..." and the white and ginger kit started clearing the herbs and old bandages from the tunnel. Scorch took

the opportunity to quickly snatch up some of the unused poppy seeds that Sonya had left near her- lapping up three.

Scorch yawned, feeling tired as coldness wore down more heavily on her. "I'm going to sleep for awhile," she murmured to Boulderpaw. He nodded and watched her with steely blue eyes as she closed her own and allowed her thoughts free reign over her dreams.

She wasn't surprised at all and sighed in contentment as she opened her eyes to a warm and wet breeze. It filled her frozen interior with empty heat that exhilarated her even when her core remained frozen. Here on the shore of that strange world she was filled with playfulness as she splashed in the puddles of water that dotted the beach.

The magnificent lake was a paler blue than the first time she had seen it, but slightly more silvery with a few pieces of ice still floating around the edges. It was cold and clear to the touch but she bent down and lapped up mouthfuls until she could hold no more and was sure it was the clearest water she'd ever tasted- even better than snow.

The sun shed its gentle yellow light as it blossomed in the white and blue patterned sky. She lay down on the warm shore and rolled around on the toasted sand with exuberance. Pausing and looking up at the blue sky, she watched the lazy clouds drift around in the slight breeze.

Its so warm... not hot, but warm. Almost like when it was changing from the warm season to cold season but it seems fresher. The air was sweet with new things and it intoxicated her like a mouse intoxicated a starving cat. It was so warm, so peaceful, so dreamy...

Scorch closed her eyes and just rejoiced in it. She'd forgotten the icy forest and her troubles. Here she felt alive and she leaped up and started bouncing in the puddles just to giggle at herself like she usually would. Pausing to watch a pair of fish leap in the lake, arching to catch the flash of the sun on their silver-white scales before falling invisible back into the lake.

Birds twittered behind her in the forest and she spied mice rustling around in the undergrowth. Although she was not hungry, she turned and stalked one for practice. It had been so long since she'd fallen into the hunter's spirit. She stilled her excited tail and controlled her breathing as she moved one paw after another as soundless as a snowfall, reveling in the long, smooth movements of stalking.

Her green eyes could see the delicious figure of the brown little mouse. Sitting and nibbling a seed, its very scent filling her with energy. With a watering mouth she leaped after it. Her paws missed it but she blocked it off and routed it to the shore to chase after it on the pleasant emptiness.

Scorch purred as she trapped the trembling creature and felt it struggling beneath her paws like the frantic flutter of a trapped butterfly. She held it by the tail and picked it up to throw it high in the air and watch it fall, stunned a few tail-lengths away. Her cruel kittenish senses kept her batting the poor dazed creature around with her sheathed paws as she chased it in circles around the shore.

"What are you doing?" a scornful voice startled her to look up and the mouse took its chance to run off. She watched it go forlornly, lamenting the loss of her toy. Scorch got over it quickly and curiosity pulled her to look over at the cat who had spoken to her.

Her eyes widened as she recognized Jasper glaring at her with amber eyes. He looked a little older even though she was sure she'd seen him just earlier that day. *Come to think of it, wasn't it super snowy?* It definitely wasn't snowy anymore.

"Playing." She answered the question and tilted her head curiously.

"You shouldn't play with your food," he scolded.

"I wasn't hungry," she mewed back.

"Then why bother catching it?" Jasper hissed, laying his ears flat.

"Where is the black kit?" Scorch noticed that the cheerful little she-kit wasn't around.

"Oh, my sister is back at camp," Jasper answered, walking closer to her. "But I would like to know why you keep showing up and disappearing again," Jasper snapped. "My sister was really upset when you lost us in the snowstorm two moons ago."

"Two moons ago!" Scorch gasped. "I didn't know it was that long, and I didn't mean to lose you."

"Just go away, my sister doesn't need to worry about you anymore. I only just got her to stop talking about you," Jasper growled.

Scorch dropped her head meekly. "I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on, I just keep coming back when I don't mean to. And leaving is like that too." *Even though I don't want to.*

"I don't care! Just stay away!"

"Yes- oh!" Scorch broke off and gasped as a lumbering shape appeared behind Jasper. "What's that?" she asked, pointing at the large black and white creature. It didn't look like anything she'd seen but it had long claws and the black beady eyes reminded her of a fox's. It smelled as bad as a fox too.

Jasper quickly looked over his shoulder and his eyes instantly widened. "That's a badger! What's it doing out at this time of day?"

"Is it dangerous? It smells disgusting!" Scorch mewed.

"Yes... and it sees us..." Jasper's voice trailed off as the big creature started moving toward them, surprisingly fast for such a fat creature. "Come on! We can lose it in the woods!" Jasper wrapped his tail around her neck and raced away with her stumbling behind him.

Scorch followed him as best she could as brambles snagged her fur and branches whipped her face while she tripped over unseen arms. "Wait! I think we lost it!" she mewed, running out of breath and growing tired of getting scratched at every step.

"Look behind you!" Jasper shouted back, not bothering to spare her a glance.

Scorch looked behind her and her eyes widened as she saw the badger pushing right through the undergrowth like it wasn't even there. "It seems angry!" fear tingled her paws but so did the exhilaration and excitement of danger. But she was still getting tired.

"Hey! Up there!" Scorch pulled ahead of Jasper and wrapped her own tail around his neck to pull him toward a large oak tree in a small clearing. Leaping onto the trunk she scrambled up as light as a squirrel and looked down at Jasper. "Come on! Climb! The badger is too big to get up here!"

Jasper lingered at the bottom, frowning as his tail bushed up with the badger coming closer. "Now!" Scorch called down, concerned. She could see the snapping maw of the badger- being caught wouldn't be pleasant.

"I've never climbed a tree before! I'll just run for it!" Jasper called back, but it was too late. The badger had snatched him and Scorch watched in appalling fascination as Jasper was picked up by the shoulder and shaken like a kit would shake a moss-ball. The badger roared, beady eyes black with malice as it tossed Jasper against the tree.

Scorch screamed down for him as he slumped against the trunk, legs shaking and eyes hollow with shock as blood soaked his shoulder and ran into his orange fur. She leaped down beside him and with a brief flash of courage- flicking her claws over the badger's nose, causing it to back away a few steps as she turned to Jasper.

In a split second, she knew he wouldn't be able to climb up with his shoulder like that. She grabbed the scruff of the tom that was twice her size and somehow managed to drag him up to the first branch. She slung him over the branch so that it was almost impossible for him to fall down into the angry badger's mouth.

The badger paced below them, snarling and grunting with anger. Jasper's blood fell upon its muzzle but it didn't pause to lick it. *Is it not hungry? But why chase us then!*

"The forest is the badgers' territory. They don't usually go to the shore or are out during the day though," Jasper read her puzzled expression.

"So it was just trying to chase us away?"

Jasper snorted before grunting with pain. "Badgers are mean tempered, it was trying to kill us. And they're stubborn, it probably won't go away until its hungry."

"I hope that's soon," Scorch mewed worriedly. "You need herbs for your shoulder."

"Herbs?" Jasper looked at her curiously.

"Yes, healing herbs. I know how to use some of them," Scorch explained.

"Like a Teller? We haven't had a Teller in a long time, or so they say. But they were able to use herbs and had special dreams? Something like that..."

Scorch pricked her ears, it kind of sounded like a medicine-cat. "Well, I think we should get higher, if you can help it? Our tails are in danger here..." she picked up Jasper's as the badger snapped at the tip. "And find a more comfortable place for you if we're stuck here."

Jasper was panting but nodded wearily, forcing himself to unsteady paws. Scorch used her shoulder to support him as they climbed upward. Luckily the branches were fairly close together so that she could boost him up without requiring him to jump.

A few tail-lengths above where they'd first climbed Scorch found a place in the trunk where two large branches went out at the same place and a little place big enough for a cat to sit comfortably had been formed. "Here is good," she helped him sit down and he leaned against the trunk with his eyes closed.

Scorch bit her tongue worriedly. She could, possibly, find some herbs and cobwebs by tree hopping but she hated to leave him on the brink of fainting. "Can you hold on for a few minutes?" she

asked. He needed help. Now.

Jasper nodded weekly, eyes sliding closed as his face took on a strained look. The wound on his shoulder wasn't slowing in its blood-flow and she was sure between the pain and blood loss he wouldn't retain consciousness much longer unless he was helped.

"I'll be quick," she promised and then she was trotting hurriedly along the tree branch. The badger took no notice of her, its nose fixed on the blood scent and the brighter orange fur of Jasper. She closed her eyes and gave herself a steadying breath as she faced the jump between the two trees. It was a clear, large leap that would be hard to make on ground without a running start. And if she fell, even though it wasn't terribly high, it would stun her and the badger was right there.

She took the leap anyways, with her heart thumping in her throat as she became airborne in an arc of grace. Her front paws caught on the end of the tree branch she had aimed for and it dipped and bounced as she withered in the air, attempting to climb up before she lost her grip. A few heart rendering moments later she was up and able to proceed through the forest of tightly woven branches.

In an old tree she carefully walked over the rickety boughs and found a surplus of cobwebs. Having to descend for herbs, she quickly was able to find fresh budding marigold and quickly made her way back laden with the herbs.

The badger was still there but she couldn't jump carrying so much so she took a chance and ran as fast as she could from the opposite side of the badger to the trunk and managed to leap up with the badger's clumsy paw just barely catching the tip of her tail- not even enough to cut it.

"Okay, I'm here," she panted around the herbs as she stepped up to the branch. Jasper was leaning with his whole weight against the tree branch and his eyes were closed as he took one deep breath after another.

"Alright, alight, just relax," she murmured. She wondered if Jasper was also suffering from shock; that would numb his senses whether

for better or for worse. She tried to engage him as she cleaned his wound with soft, gentle strokes of her tongue.

He remained tense and reclined as she rubbed the stinging marigold juice into his wounds and put a layer of cobwebs over it, holding it tight as it soaked with blood. This was a deep wound and she needed it to stop before she could really bind it.

"Jasper, where do you live?" she asked the random question as she talked to him.

"In the moors." She pricked her ears as he answered.

"Really? I live in a pine forest, but the moors are so expansive and desolate- it reminds me of where I'm from," she spoke softly, half-forgotten memories flashing behind her gentle gaze.

"So you're not from here?" Jasper panted.

"No."

"Are you from the mountains? You did mention them."

Scorch shook her head softly. "No, I'm not from there. I can't explain where I'm from, its too beautiful."

Comfortable silence came over them as Jasper gradually calmed down and the blood-flow gradually ebbed. By sunset she was able to bind the cobwebs in place and sit back to relax. "Do you think it'll leave soon?" she asked. The badger was snuffling around on the other side of the clearing but Jasper couldn't run in his condition and she couldn't leave him.

"No, it could stay around all night depending on how hungry and angry it is. By morning it'll probably leave, but I think we should just get some sleep and go when we wake up," Jasper yawned slumped down against the tree trunk.

Scorch agreed sleepily, feeling the warmth of the sun melt into the cool touch of the stars. Climbing a little higher she found another crook and stretched out across the lukewarm, smooth branches. Closing her eyes with a sigh she relished in the prey-scented air and

the peaceful repose of night. It was so nice here, she didn't think she'd be sad if she had to stay here. *Stay here and have a new life with no Clans, no powers, no enemies... Just worry about myself and my friends.*

"Hey? Are you hungry?" She was sure she'd only just closed her eyes in the marvelous world when she was blinking awake with freezing air telling her she wasn't in that beautiful haven anymore.

"Sonya?" she murmured, opening her bleary eyes unhappily and feeling stiff and cold. As disappointed as she was to wake up here, Sonya was the one looking more unhappy as she scanned Scorch's face anxiously.

"I'm fine," Scorch reassured her hollowly. She didn't feel hungry, in fact, she didn't feel any pain either. "Is there something wrong?"

Sonya looked over her shoulder at Boulderpaw who was evidently asleep. "You weren't breathing, but your heart was still beating," Sonya murmured in her ear.

"So, there is something wrong?" Sonya nodded gravely.

"This is a dangerous situation. I don't know what's wrong and I have no way to know. But as long as you're okay, we can let it go for now. I'll just watch you closely." Sonya didn't look as relaxed as her words suggested.

But Scorch nodded, feeling her heart beat in her throat in frustration. She wasn't sure she wanted to get well, she just wanted to be in that world. The Clans had done just fine in the fight without her, she wasn't needed by them anymore. Her parents were sure to have gotten over her loss by now, would anyone miss her if she just stayed in that world? *But how?I can only seem to go there when I'm sleeping.*

"Oh, and Scorch, you should eat that. We'll be traveling back to the Clans later, you need a real medicine-cat," Sonya mewed. "You and Boulderpaw finally get to go home," the she-cat purred.

Scorch nodded and pulled at the mouse. She didn't feel hungry, she

didn't feel sick. Just cold and tired. All she wanted was to drift back into that other world and never drift back.

Chapter 39: Existing

Chapter 39: Existing

The wary wandering feeling remained with Scorch as they made the slow journey back to the camp. The young group rested often and walked slowly; Sonya's bright eyes seemingly fixed on Scorch's neck wound all the time. But not fixed enough, apparently, to notice the blank look in the dark green eyes.

"Are you tired?" Sonya asked her for the umpteenth time since the last time they'd taken a break.

"No." Scorch didn't feel tired physically, and sitting down to rest would only help her physical condition. She would have said that she felt strong, but she couldn't hardly feel anything and she kept waiting for it to scare her. The fear that something was wrong with her. But it didn't come to Scorch, she just kept watching the world around her with wary eyes, awaiting her chance to slip into the reality of her dreams.

Boulderpaw walked steadily beside her, never glancing her way or asking anything, but keeping his gaze firmly on the horizon of the dark forest. Scorch glanced at her friend, his gray fur was smooth but she sensed just a slight disquietude emanating steadily from him. Like her, he didn't seem to be angry, but he wasn't happy either.

The forest was cold and eerily quiet, clouds had moved in and set a heavy overcast feeling over the land that was echoed deeply in Scorch's heart. Although she guessed it was about sun-high do to the angle of the gray shadows, it was about as dark as twilight as they passed back into Clan territory.

Boulderpaw visibly relaxed as they crossed the border and a thought crossed Scorch's mind about how funny it was that he was happy to be in ShadowClan territory. But she remained silent. Her mouth seemed sealed closed, opening only when it was necessary.

But in the other world, the words flow so easily.

Although she hadn't really wondered the reason for this change, she was sure it had something to do with her touching the sunlight. Had part of her died in that moment? If so, was there a way to get it back? Did she even want it back? No, the part of her left behind simply longed to join with its other half permanently. She just wasn't sure how to do that.

"We're almost there now!" Sonya purred beside her. Boulderpaw nodded and his steps quickened to pull ahead of them a little.

Scorch walked at her same slow, steady pace. No excitement pricked her, just a faint curiosity of when she'd be able to go back to sleep. "Scorch, aren't you happy?" Sonya asked her cheerfully.

The black and red kit nodded slowly, a faint comforting feeling settled over her as she saw the camp and she perceived it for happiness. "But I think its empty," she mewed. No strong cat scent came from the island in the marsh and she couldn't see any flicker of pelts on the white surface.

Boulderpaw seemed to have noticed as well and Scorch stopped with Sonya at the edge of the marsh as the gray apprentice trotted over the log into the camp. He disappeared into the camp but reappeared moment later, shouting that no cat was there.

Sonya frowned, "Where could they have gone?" but there was no real question in her voice and Scorch narrowed her eyes. In this reclusive state she could see some thing more clearly than she had been able to do in her frivolousness before.

"The real ShadowClan camp?" Scorch guessed. Sonya nodded and signaled for Boulderpaw. He trotted back over the log to them and Sonya informed him where they thought the cats had gone.

The gray apprentice nodded, "Makes sense, the ShadowClan cats would want to go home, and its more sheltered and spacious than this."

They began traveling to the old ShadowClan camp and Scorch

paused for just a moment to look over her shoulder at the makeshift camp. It sat lonely and desolate, a crown of bushes and dens in a white emptiness and it was sad to think of it falling apart after all it had housed. For a moment, she wished she could feel sadness just to color her memories with it.

But it was soon out of sight and out of mind as they headed west into the woods, away from the lake. Scorch hadn't been in this area much and neither had Boulderpaw, but Sonya confidently followed a slightly worn trail in the snow and guided them past marsh patches and a single bramble patch that laid treacherously under the snow.

"Is that it?" Sonya asked sweetly as they looked down at a small hollow where discreetly sat a bramble encircled clearing that was mostly blocked by low tree branches. Scorch recognized it as the place she had escaped from just a few sunrises ago and nodded.

"Lets go," Scorch mewed, not even feeling a shiver of fear as she entered back into the place that had spelled her death so clearly.

Boulderpaw pushed past her as they went into the entrance and his gray fur brushed hers as he stepped into the clearing before her, standing in front of her firmly. Scorch already knew that it was safe, she could smell the familiar mingle of ShadowClan and faint RiverClan scents.

She peered past Boulderpaw's gray fur and spied cats lounging casually in the clearing; eating prey and chatting cheerfully or just sleeping lazily in the cold air. The fear and desperation that had gripped these pitiful creatures into fury had dissipated like mist at noonday and even in the cold weather they were celebrating with overflowing normality.

A few cats had glanced up at Boulderpaw's entrance and several were making their way over to them. Scorch's heart seemed to stop beating, for the first time a feeling broke through to her: anxiety. She backed away a few steps, in Boulderpaw's shadow, no cat had seen her.

"Oof!" she bumped into Sonya and the white and ginger she-kit

pushed her forward with incredible force until she was coming up around Boulderpaw's side.

A screech broke the clearing and a gray streak raced for her. Boulderpaw halted Mira's frantic approach with a head-butt but the she-cat stood up again and started covering Scorch's face with licks as tears fell upon the ground. "Oh Scorch, oh Scorch!" Scorch trembled ever so slightly with so many eyes upon her and gasps aimed at her as murmurings and cries sounded around the clearing.

The commotion pulled cats from their dens and Scorch saw Flickertail peak out of a dark corner to duck back inside and appear a moment later with herbs in his mouth. Sunstar appeared as well, striding across the clearing with a hint of urgency in his long steps.

Scorch also noticed Painted staring at her with wide eyed, just to turn her head away when their eyes met. Scorch was sure she saw two tears fall from Painted's forest green eyes. Jump was besides Willowwater just behind Mira and relieved looks were plastered on their faces. Only Raven looked unmoved, staring at her from the back with narrowed amber eyes. But she gave Scorch a nod and a small smile.

"Stand back, stand back!" Flickertail ordered as he came toward her. "Scorch!" he cried. No tears were shed by him though as he instantly investigated her wounds. Sunstar and Mira remained by the medicine-cat's side and Scorch had lost sight of Boulderpaw and Sonya. Her heartbeat quickened in panic and her eyes flicked around desperately.

"I need her in my den, right now," Flickertail ordered in a low, serious tone.

Sunstar nodded and immediately ordered a path opened for Scorch and Flickertail to the medicine-cat den which was in a dark corner just past the leader's bramble den. A few moments later they were in the hollowed sandy-floored den that was covered with a mix of dead pine-needles and herb scraps.

"That is a serious wound," Flickertail murmured, gently touching her neck and peering at it closely, his tail flicking anxiously behind

him.

"It doesn't hurt much," Scorch mumbled as she shuffled her paws and sat down.

Flickertail rummaged through his stores and turned back to her with a thick, green poultice and a layer of moss and cobwebs. "Lay down in that nest," he nodded to the one that smelled slightly of him. "Its pretty fresh," he added at her hesitance.

Although that hadn't been what she was concerned about, she nodded and slipped down into it. "I don't want you to move an inch while I work on this," Flickertail mewed, starting to unwrap her bandages.

Scorch ignored the slight, pricking pain and her eyes fixed on a long, thin thorn Flickertail had put on the cobwebs. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

Flickertail didn't answer, "I'm going to stitch the wound closed so that it won't open easily," he murmured, amber eyes concentrating as he carefully held the torn and spider thread between his toes. Scorch's eyes widened and she looked away as he worked, trying to ignore the pricking ache and the warm blood that oozed out.

"All done," Flickertail sighed in relief and gave her a weak smile. It hadn't taken long, but Scorch was trembling from the strain of not moving under the pain, no matter how slight it felt. Flickertail then put on the thick green poultice and held the cool gel to her throat for a few minutes.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Scorch asked.

"What?"

"The stitching, I've never thought of it before," Scorch mewed, she shivered. She knew why she hadn't, it looked scary to poke something through flesh- even something that thin.

"I'm surprised," Flickertail purred. "It was your mother that showed me how to do it; she once saved a ShadowClan warrior's life with it."

"Which warrior?" Scorch couldn't call up much curiosity, hard as she tried, but she managed the words.

Flickertail laughed now. "His name was Needlepine."

Scorch started, she'd never heard that story. But her slight interest faded into melancholy as she thought of her parents. "He's my father," she muttered, pulling her tail over her nose.

Flickertail nodded slowly, "I assumed; Willowwater told me when Rainstone left that she was expecting Needlepine's kits. We're the only two that know though..." the medicine-cat seemed to recline into memories of a time gone by.

Scorch laid silent, not moving, not thinking. Eventually Flickertail pulled cobwebs over her wound and sat back with a sigh. "That should keep you alive, do you want some poppy seeds?"

Scorch asked for three and Flickertail gave her two. "That will be enough, now you get some sleep. I'm sure Sunstar has talked to Boulderpaw by now, so you don't need to worry about anything."

"What about Sonya?" Scorch yawned as sleep came over her.

"Who?" his amber eyes looked at her in confusion.

Scorch shook her head slowly. "Nevermind."

...

"Jasper!" Scorch breathed into the orange tom's ear as he slept. He was in the exact spot as he'd been in when she'd left him in the tree. Gray misty light heralded morning's approach and the bulky badger had gone from its post in the clearing.

"Hmm? Huh?" he lifted his head and turned it toward her without opening his eyes.

"The badger's gone!" she purred cheerfully.

"Oh?" Jasper opened his amber eyes and leaned past her to look down. "So it is," he murmured, stretching in the tight space.

"Well?" Scorch asked, tail flicking with excitement. "What now? Are we going to your home?" her eyes glowed at the thought of seeing the black kit again and being surrounded by cats and curiosity that she could enjoy.

Jasper shook his head sharply, "No, I told you I don't want you bothering my sister again with your come and go routine. I'm surprised you're still here after a night to be honest." He narrowed his eyes and her excitement diminished.

"I know I'm not the most reliable," she muttered. "But you can't just leave me alone here and, besides, you need a cat to help you back with that wound," she protested.

Jasper growled, "I'm fine, and you seem to be doing well..." he looked her up and down and his eyes grew confused for a moment. "Oh, well, if you want company..."

"Yes!" Scorch cheered, jumping up a branch in her energetic joy.

"Wait! You still can't come back with me, but I can come visit you on the shore most days if you wish. I'm usually free around sun-high if you want to meet then to ease your loneliness," Jasper huffed and looked away as he made the offer and Scorch wondered why a tingle of embarrassment came from him.

But it swept through her in a pleasing way and she nodded, "Yes, okay, that's fine. But let me help you back to the moors at least," she begged, watching with a frown as he stood up with the leg of his injured shoulder trembling.

"No, I'm fine, now come on," Jasper clumsily slid to the ground and Scorch jumped down after him, sticking to his side and watching the wound for fresh bleeding as they traveled through the foggy forest. Scorch stopped to breathe in the fresh flow of air as they came out of the woods onto the shore, the land was still swamped with gray shadows and little tails of steam rose off the lake, but she could smell the upcoming dawn on her tongue. It gave her an anticipating excitement as she turned her eyes toward the direction of the moors.

"Its going to be a pretty sunrise," she declared to Jasper.

He glanced at her, "If you say so."

And beautiful it was; it broke upon them as they crested the first hill of the moors. Ribbons flew across the gray sky in divine colors that lit the heavens in tender pink, savory yellow, and a resplendent blue that raced around the edges of the colors.

"So pretty," she sighed blissfully.

"Quite magnificent," Jasper mewed, but his heart wasn't in his words.

Scorch nudged him, "Don't you see all those colors?" she demanded.

Jasper glanced up, "Yes, and I see them every morning. What's the big deal?"

"Its beautiful!" Scorch gasped, as if that wasn't obvious.

"Beauty loses its luster after awhile. Time wears on its shine and it fades with its value lost," Jasper grumbled under his breath, striding on. Scorch frowned and trotted after him. "Aren't you supposed to stay on the shore?" the orange cat asked her pointedly.

Scorch stopped, "Yes, but I think you're wrong," she mewed.

He looked confused, "About what?"

"Beauty becoming dull over time. Its not time that makes beauty less grand, its your appreciation of beauty that is worn down," Scorch mewed.

Jasper looked back at her one more time, eyes narrowed as she glimmered in the light and shadows. "Maybe."

...

The next few days of Clan life was spent recovering. Flickertail forbade her from moving and kept visitors to a minimum so that only Painted, Mira, and Sunstar had gotten in to see her for a little

bit. But Scorch didn't mind, it gave her more time to sleep and dream herself into the other world.

The sandy shore, the warm air, the pure water, and the comforting breeze filled her senses and mind in whichever world she was in and an orange tom with amber eyes invaded her thoughts when she was awake.

"That cloud looks like a ladybug," Scorch mewed, using her paw to indicate which white cloud it was.

"Hmm... yeah, it kind of does," Jasper rumbled from where he lay beside her. The hot sand was warm on their backs and the sun glared into their eyes as the sound of lapping waves and whistling wind filled their ears.

It was a particularly warm day in this wonderful world Scorch had found herself happily a part of, and they were spending the time lying and watching the sky that was dotted with big, white clouds like sheep. *What a wonderful day...* she wasn't thinking about the Clans and the problems they were having at the moment. Right now she was free of any responsibility and she enjoyed the lax flavor of it.

"I think even the flowers are sleepy today," Scorch murmured, glancing at the wildflowers that dropped ever so slightly as if relaxing from their growth spurt.

"I'd be nice to just take a nap," Jasper murmured, stifling a yawn as he looked at her. "But I'd get in trouble if I was found sleeping out here in the middle of the day," he mewed, sitting up.

"Okay," Scorch sat up too and yawned as she looked around the quite landscape. "Its so peaceful," she murmured, stretching her ears just to hear nothing but the rustling of leaves in the trees and the flow of water.

"It smells good to," Jasper mewed. "I don't usually spend so much time near the forest, but it smells sweeter than the open moor," his eyes were considering but he shook his head. "I like the expansiveness of it anyways," he muttered.

"The moors are a little smothering though, its so big," Scorch mewed. The moors didn't make her feel small like she did when she had stood at the edge of the endless ocean. But they made her feel desolate, as if she were the only one under the sky.

"Its quiet and gives lots of space to breathe," Jasper answered.

Scorch wasn't sure *quiet* was the right word to use, the wind over the moor was often quite noisy and sound traveled far and wide without anything to block its way. But still, somehow to word sat well to the rolling hills. "Definitely quiet."

Jasper looked at her, "I'll need to be going soon, do you want to be here again tomorrow?" there was a hopefulness in his voice and Scorch bet he wished he would be relieved of these constant visits. She hadn't yet missed a single day when she dreamed and she always arrived just before Jasper, no matter what time she fell asleep.

"Yes, please," she mewed. She didn't feel guilty about stealing his time, they weren't together long and she couldn't imagine giving up these small visits. Besides, they had made a deal, hadn't they?

"I'll see you tomorrow then," Scorch mewed, nodding a goodbye as Jasper turned up the shore, leaving small paw-prints in the sand that were soon washed over by the waves, as quickly lost as wandering thoughts.

Scorch stretched. Their visits before now had been longer and she wasn't ready to wake up yet. She maundered down to the shore and dabbled her paw in the water as it swept past her paws with little eddies. Today it didn't seem as horribly cold- though still cool enough to make her careful that the water didn't go higher than her paws. But it calmed her nerves as she walked along the shoreline in the opposite direction of the moors.

A dark haze surrounded the shore half-way around the lake and she was curious about what was there. She had worked out enough that this place was indeed the lake territories that she awoke to. But it was far from the place she knew. No Clans lived here, and although she hadn't been in ThunderClan territory often, she was sure that it

smelled and looked much different than she recalled.

Is this the lake in another world? A dream world? Or is it possible that I'm here in a different... She shook her head abruptly- that was impossible. She stopped, a stream ran into the lake at her paws and swept the current past quickly.

This would have been the border between ThunderClan and ShadowClan had the Clans been here. But Scorch had never seen it running and her eyes widened at how much clearer it was then the deep lake water. It was almost white, with just the touch of silver-blue to show it was water. She skimmed her paw over it and jumped back. It was as cold as ice!

Carefully, she leaped over it, her tail splashing in it behind her and causing her to jump at its icy grip. She looked back at it, such a tiny thing divided warring enemies. The cats in ShadowClan avoided this area usually for fear Pinefur would hear what they were doing, but Scorch guessed it wouldn't be for much longer that they allowed Pinefur to remain in the forest. *I wonder what they're planning to do for liberating ThunderClan and WindClan.*

She hadn't heard anything, granted she hadn't been trying to listen, but she supposed a few days of recuperation were in order for the newly freed Clans before they began thinking of fighting again. Scorch felt a twang of uneasiness- was she really going to abandon the Clans for this world when half of them were still suffering?

She twitched her tail, *its not my problem.* She looked up at the sky with a perplexed look. That's what Boulderpaw and Painted had told her. And she'd answered them, *I made it my problem.* She sighed, she just didn't know how she felt anymore.

When she was here, she didn't feel against helping the Clans, though it seemed so distant that she hardly thought about it. But when she was back in the forest, all she wanted was to get here. *Why is that?* She sat down on the shore and looked out over the waves in contemplation.

With a groan she realized she had no idea for her sudden disinterest in the world she lived in. But whatever it was, she knew she

wouldn't have the care to fix it back in her own world. So if she chose to fix it, it had to be here. Scorch played with the sand, did she want to fix it? A question that went unanswered.

Scorch woke up to the dreary day that faced her with suffocating fog and chilly air that she stirred with her breath. Curled tighter into a ball, she glanced at Flickertail who was sleeping in his own nest. Between the light and outside sounds she guessed it was just barely dawn.

Cleaning a paw, she ran it over her whiskers to straighten them and sat up slowly. There was no place she wanted to go and nothing she wanted to do. But she was thirsty, so she quietly left the den and padded over to the camp entrance. The entrance was still warm from the sentry who had just gone to rest and she exited through the thorn tunnel to the open-spaced pine forest.

She had heard that there was a pool of water near the ShadowClan camp so that cats didn't have to go all the way to the lake or border stream for a drink of fresh water. She walked stiffly; her paws hurt and her chest ached. It hadn't hurt like this at first. But even this uncomfortableness was more of a shallow dull ache compared to the pain she had once felt.

She found the pool coated with a thin sheet of ice but clear of snow, suggesting it was frequently broken open to get the water. She moved so that her less injured back paws were closer to the water and leaned on her front paws, bringing her back ones down to smash the ice.

Jumping forward before her paws could get wet, she turned to the released water and lapped up mouthful after mouthful, not realizing how thirsty she had been. Feeling slightly better, she sat down on the snow and for a moment felt content in the silent morning fog.

It was a short-lived moment though. The fog seemed to whisper images back to her of the wonderful world she had left and she longed again for the warmth and the peace and the depth she felt there. Here she felt empty, there she felt full. The choice between the two was quite obvious.

But can I really make that choice?

Scorch shook her head and started back for the camp before Flickertail started worrying about her since he hadn't allowed her to sit up yet, let alone leave camp. The dawn patrol was just leaving, the sleepy and fluffed-up cats groaning in the fog. Scorch slipped in after they left, making sure she was not seen but noticing nonetheless a cat on the patrol that she didn't recognize- a tall white she-cat whose scent was only faintly familiar.

I didn't lose memory, did I? With a faint prick of alarm she headed quickly for the medicine-cat den before more cats woke up. Slipping past Sunstar's new den she entered the sheltered corner and slid into her nest, keeping one eye on the resting Flickertail to make sure she didn't wake him up. She wasn't sure if his tail ever slept, as it twitched around the red-brown tom.

She sighed and lay there, thinking of how pretty the lake had been with the sun sparkling on the water; knowing if she went there now only a dull luster would reflect back at her. Sighing some more, she snuggled deeper into her nest as a defense against the cold.

"Are you still here, Scorch?" the red and black kit ignored Sonya's voice. *"Answer me, are you still here?"*

Not for long, I hope. Scorch flicked her ears as the thought crossed her mind.

"So you think you want to leave?"

I know I do, she answered back. *Where are you anyways? Why didn't you come with us to the Clans?*

"The Clans are not my home. But I am nearby; would you meet me at the dock near RiverClan territory at dusk?"

No, Scorch ignored her friend in a fit of irritation and apathy.

"Oh, Scorch, you're awake," Flickertail mewed.

"No, I'm not," Scorch grumbled.

"It's alright, you can stay in your nest. I just had a few questions to ask you," his voice turned serious.

Scorch peeked open an eye at him dully. "Okay," she sighed.

"Did you know that you stop breathing when you sleep? Only your heart keeps beating- just barely." Flickertail was standing over her and she froze.

"I... was told that," she looked away.

"Do you know why that happens? And why when you wake up, you return to normal?"

"Do you?" Scorch narrowed her eyes up at him.

He shook his head, but he looked strained and angry. "No, I don't. But you should have told me earlier. Scorch, this could kill you!"

"Maybe I'm okay with that!" she snapped back, feeling absolutely nothing except a faint spark of anger that didn't know where to go.

"This isn't like you!" Flickertail pleaded with her. "You love life and you love helping others. You can't just throw your life away so young! We have to fight and figure out how to help you! But I can't do this without you!"

"Why not?" Scorch asked. "You're the medicine-cat!"

"But you are not a normal cat," Flickertail hissed in her ears. "I know you are different, and I know that you do too." Shivers went down her spine.

"I don't understand my powers anymore than you could, only Sonya-" Scorch broke off. Flickertail's eyes lit up.

"Who is 'Sonya?'"

Scorch looked away grumpily. Flickertail growled again and headed for the den, she could feel his determination and knew he was going to look for Boulderpaw. He looked back at her, "I guess this is your decision. But I would advise you choose to live in this world rather

than being stuck with your head in the stars."

Chapter 40: Lacuna

Chapter 40: Lacuna

Inaudible whispering disturbed Scorch. She opened one eye from her designated nest in the medicine-cat den- err, corner- and glanced out to see who had disrupted her attempt at sleep. Flickertail and Sunstar were talking in low voices in front of the leader's den that was also practically the entrance to the corner.

Scorch tried to ignore them; she knew Flickertail was taking action over her... problem. But that meant that she didn't need to then. It was only this morning that he had confronted her about it. While she had done nothing but mope in her nest, having not been given any poppy seeds to help her sleep; He had been talking with Boulderpaw and Sunstar and every other cat to know if they knew about Sonya.

From what she'd overheard though, no cat had known much about Sonya, though Boulderpaw had answered all the questions he'd been asked. Truth was, he just didn't know Sonya. A few other cats had known something of the ginger and white kit as well, but hadn't know anything about her relationship with Scorch or her current whereabouts.

Scorch glanced up as Flickertail came into the den, tail lashing madly. "We are going to find this cat!" he hissed, glaring at nothing. Scorch rolled and stretched, watching him absentmindedly. "Do your wounds hurt?" Flickertail asked anxiously as he saw her stretching.

"No." They didn't, so why did he look angry at her answer?

"Fine," he snapped. "Do you know where to find Sonya?"

Scorch shook her head. It wasn't lying, she didn't know. Even though Sonya had offered to meet her around dusk- which was right now. "Can I have some poppy seeds?" she asked. The injured kit

hadn't taken a single nap that day and she saw growing tired, but not tired enough to sleep too deeply.

"No," Flickertail answered coldly. "Not unless you tell me where Sonya is."

"I don't know where she is," Scorch answered. "She disappeared as soon as we entered camp and I haven't seen her since."

Flickertail looked like he was trying to decide whether or not to believe her. "That's what Bouldepaw told me," he admitted.

Scorch waited for him to give her two poppy seeds and she could already anticipate the feeling of grass on her fur and the sun draping her like a cloak. "I don't know why you need these when you can't feel pain, but they can't hurt you," Flickertail muttered as he gave her two seeds.

Scorch lapped them up and tucked her head close to her chest, waiting to drift out of this troublesome world. She closed her eyes on the turmoil and incessant babble and opened them to a clear, warm day with the soothing touch of nature surrounding her.

Sitting up, she yawned and stretched. Here her wounds were nonexistent and she could move her loose, supple body as easily as ever. Glancing around the shore, she spotted a group of ducklings waddling after their mother toward the lake; a vole digging in the sand; and a fish leaping from the water. As beautiful as it always was.

Not a cloud obstructed the glorious blue sky and the sun was warm and kind without being overly hot or blinding. It was nearly sun-high, so she wouldn't have long to wait for Jasper. Sighing with a sort of contentment, she laid on her belly and watched the waves surge and recede with a mesmerized gaze.

"You're here before me, as always," she flicked an ear at Jasper's greeting. "How are you today, Wing?" she looked up at the name and for a moment wished she could tell him her real name. But some part of her, as weakened as it had become, still held back from revealing her identity.

"You're just always late," she purred. "And I am just fine, as always. I hope the same goes for you," she mewed politely.

Jasper nodded his head as he walked over to her. He laid down next to her, just close enough that their fur brushed and she felt a tingle of excitement go through her as his scent rubbed off on her fur. "Everything is fine. The warm season has fully arrived and the prey is quite plentiful."

Scorch nodded, eyes half closing as she listened to his tone of voice mingle with the rhythm of the waves. "How is your family?" she asked.

"You know, you always ask me that. But what about yours?" Jasper turned his serious amber eyes on her. But they were warmer than they had been the first time she had met them.

Scorch looked away awkwardly though. Would she ever be comfortable talking about her half-forgotten family? "They're fine, I'm sure," she mewed gruffly.

"You're sure?" Jasper narrowed his eyes and nudged her. "Come on, you can tell me. I'm not going to tell any cat else about you."

Scorch looked back at him in embarrassment. Of course she knew that, he was the one going out of his way so that his family and friends wouldn't know about her. But she was still hesitant, worried about the gossiping trees and the curious waves.

"Well, uh, I haven't actually seen my family in moons. I was separated from them when I was four moons old and I haven't seen them since," Scorch looked away quickly, feeling her face heat up.

"Oh, I see. That must have been so hard," Jasper's tone was sympathetic.

"Yeah, but, its not like I'm not doing just fine on my own," Scorch declared.

"If I may, how old are you?" Jasper asked curiously.

Scorch looked at him, "I think I'm close to seven moons... or was it

eight?" she didn't quite remember. Things had been so chaotic that age hadn't mattered much to her or any other cat.

Jasper nodded, "I'm ten moons. You just seem kind of small, more like five or six moons old."

Scorch fur fluffed up, "I may be small but that doesn't mean I'm a kit!"

Jasper laughed, "Of course not. Though that was a very kittenish reaction," he teased.

Scorch hissed playfully and jumped to her paws, "I'll show you kittenish!" Jasper jumped to run and she chased him around the shore. Even though he was taller than she was, her legs pumped faster and she closed the distance between them.

With a leap she landed on his back and he toppled over into the lake and she gulped in a breath of air before she kit the water with him. The lake water was cold, but not numbingly so and she raised her muzzle and gasped in air as she blinked water out of her eyes.

Jasper was sitting in the lake where he has fallen in- shaking with water streaming from his fur. Scorch was deeper in, with the water around her belly and she quickly splashed her way over to him with a purr in her throat.

"Not a fan of water, are we?" she purred.

"You actually *like* getting soaked to the bone?" Jasper gaped at her.

Scorch laughed- he looked so funny with his fur all soggy and his mouth hanging open. "No, I don't like getting wet," she admitted. "But its not the worst thing in the world!"

Jasper shook his head as if he couldn't understand and stood up, heading for the sandy shore. Scorch followed him and noticed a black dot approaching them from the direction of the moors. "Whose that?" she asked, narrowing her eyes against the glare of the sun.

Jasper followed her gaze and jumped, "That's my little sister. Hurry

and go hide before she spots you!" he hissed.

Scorch, startled, hastily followed Jasper's orders and started for the forest. But it was too far away and the kit was moving too fast. She was overtaken by the kit before she was half-way to cover. "Wing!" the kit cried.

Scorch stumbled back as the kit slowed and bumped into her. She looked in surprise; the black kit now stood taller than her and the fluffy kit fur had smoothed to a sleek pelt. Scorch was sure they were the same age now, but hadn't they been different before?

"Er, hello," Scorch greeted the excited young she-cat anxiously, avoiding Jasper's cold stare.

"I thought you'd gotten lost and frozen in that snowstorm! But here you are! And you look so...!" The kit stepped back for a moment, looking confused. "You look exactly the same?" the kit purred, but her amber eyes were troubled and Scorch felt a pang go shooting through her as she looked into those frowning eyes.

She knew this cat. Her breath quickened. Scorch knew who this kit was. Her vision narrowed. And who she could be. Her skin turned cold.

"Wing? Wing!" Jasper's voice pounded her ears while the kit's voice squeaked anxiously in the background. "Are you okay?" he spoke slowly and his voice broke through to her.

"Yes," she nodded her head, eyes flicking around as if she had just stopped spinning and the world hadn't yet fallen into place. Scorch turned to the black kit who was looking at her with concern. "Can you tell me your name?" she asked the kit.

The black she-kit frowned, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Wing, maybe you ought to go sit down and rest for awh-"

"No!" she hissed, interrupting Jasper before turning back to the kit. "Tell me your name!" she demanded. "Please."

The black cat nodded slowly, "Okay, but then will you go rest?"

Scorch nodded in agreement and pricked her ears forward earnestly. She knew the name that would be spoken, she could already feel its familiar presence in her ears like the echo of the whistling wind.

The young black cat exchanged a worried glance with Jasper. But he nodded slowly and the black kit took a deep breath. "My name is Song."

Scorch blinked. It was as she'd thought. But her heartbeat raced uncontrollably at what this meant. At what it could mean. But her heart was breaking. She couldn't stay here, she couldn't come back here. Her paradise had been stolen.

She dropped her head, "I'm sorry, I need to leave," she whispered hoarsely. All she knew was that she had to get as far away from here as possible. Jasper opened his mouth but his words fell on deaf ears as she spun on her paws- the world a water-colored blur around her- and dashed down the shore before crashing into the woods.

The black and red kit had never run as hard as she did now. Ducking and twisting and pulling and tearing her way through the thick of the forest. She didn't stop for breath until she was under the comforting silence and gentle darkness of the pine trees.

Her legs folded beneath her and she fell into the soft layer of pine needles, smelling the sweet sap air cling to her fur. But her eyes were bleary as she silently shed a few tears. *How could I have been so stupid? Of course it was Song!* She could hear the accent now, she hadn't recognized it in the kit voice used by this Song, but it had been there. The scent was different though, she defended herself, this Song smelled of wind and heather while her Song smelled of water and rock.

But I remembered what Sonya said! I knew she didn't want me talking to these cats and now I know why. She lifted her red and black furred head solemnly. "This can not be my home."

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A moon passed. It passed so quickly that Scorch hardly noticed. Each day she grew a little stronger and she walked a little further from her nest. But even though her mind had returned to normal among Clan life as she abandoned her illusions; emotions remained untouchable. She remained as empty as she'd been when she longed for her other world. But now not even that filled her with warmth.

She still continued to return there despite her efforts; She had not control over it. But she spent that time wandering the lonely pine forests or gazing out from the shadows at the lake. The sunshine and happiness didn't touch her.

But she had to make sure to stay far away from Song and Jasper. As much as she longed to talk to them, she knew that she could not mess with it. Now she understood where Sonya had brought her, where that place was, why it had changed so suddenly. It was a place of reachable time. She could travel through time there, or so it seemed even though she did not know how to control it. She had gone back to ancient times, before Song had left for the mountains where her mother would later travel from.

The black and red kit longed to talk to Sonya about it. But Sonya had been silent ever since Scorch had refused to see her- and guilt clawed at Scorch's belly like eagle's talons at the memory. Her Clan life was filled with empty emotions and passing thoughts. Hard as she tried to be an active member again, she simply could not remember half of what she listened to or observed.

"Scorch, do you want to share this mouse?" she looked up at Boulderpaw. He had visited her every day, or so she was told. But his blue eyes were unreadable and she couldn't pick up anything from him except a distant wariness. Or perhaps those were her own feelings.

"Yes," she mewed quietly, sitting up from where she was pondering in her nest. Flickertail was gone at the moment but he wouldn't mind since her neck wound had healed enough that the stitching had been removed and a clear scar was forming.

The prey was a scrawny mouse and Scorch was aware that at the end of the cold season there was even less prey then ever before.

The darkest part of the night was just before the sun rose. Boulderpaw allowed her to have the first bite but she took a small one; she was barely hungry.

"You can have more, you know," Boulderpaw muttered.

Scorch shook her head and let him take the larger bites. "I don't need it."

"Yes, you do," Boulderpaw grumbled.

"No, all I do is sit around all day," Scorch muttered. She didn't feel sorry for herself, she just was getting tired of talking.

"You won't be today," Boulderpaw lifted his head. Scorch tilted her head tot he side, questioningly. "We're going to find Sonya."

Scorch hardly had time to question him before he dragged her to her paws and started hurrying out of camp. No cat had been out in the clearing, probably because of the looming snow clouds, and they had made it into the pine forest and hidden behind a bramble screen while a patrol returned with a sparse catch of fresh-kill.

Scorch had remained silent, watching Boulderpaw as he led her through the shadowed tracks. The earth was silent with its coating of snow and even the pines were motionless as they hung heavy above their heads. Part of her wanted to ask where Sonya was, but her mouth stayed shut as she kept her eyes fixed on the twitching tail tip in front of her nose.

"Sonya told me to bring you and meet by the lake," Boulderpaw spoke ahead, turning his head to glance back at her.

Why didn't she tell me? Scorch felt resentment and guilt mingle inside her as she turned her face away from Boulderpaw's gaze. "Did she say why?" she muttered. The gray tom stopped and looked at her with wide eyes as a smirk covered his face. "What?"

Boulderpaw shook his head, "Nothing. Sonya just said she had some news."

Scorch stamped her paws as she pulled up beside him. "Lets go

then," she mewed impassively.

He dipped his head and pulled slightly ahead of her as he guided her confidently through the forest. He obviously had been investigating the territory this past moon. Scorch noticed how her head barely reached his shoulder. Suddenly, he didn't seem smaller than Jasper.

"When did you get so tall?" The last time they'd been together, she was sure her head had been at his chin. If he had grown, shouldn't she have as well?

"I just grew," he narrowed his eyes at her, the blue reflected her confusion. "But you don't look like you grew much at all." Anxious tension grew between them and Scorch fell back into silence as her eyes flicked from one dingy pine tree to the next. All around them they were surrounded with black shadows and white snow.

"We're almost there," Boulderpaw rumbled. Scorch nodded but didn't make a sound as she perceived the change of light and the thinning of shadows around them as the tree-line came to an abrupt end ahead.

Boulderpaw quickened his pace and Scorch forced herself into a trot to keep up as they traveled the last few meters until they came out upon the frost-ridden shore. For a moment, she saw the warm colors of green-leaf and the deep blue lake. But it was only an illusion and she blinked her eyes to the silver light that glowed on the varying shades of gray. Pale gray snow and sky, dark gray shadows in the distance, and a stone gray lake. For a heartbeat she still admired the intricate designs etched into the surface of the ice, but it was short lived.

Besides, a flash of red attracted her attention and she looked to see Sonya heading toward them. Her green eyes were bright and cheery as always. Scorch stood back as Boulderpaw greeted her and they both turned toward her.

"Scorch! It's good to see that you are doing well," Sonya purred.

Scorch dipped her head awkwardly, "You too."

Boulderpaw was looking between the two she-cats as Scorch watched on with a detached air and Sonya stared at the black and red kit with devotion. "Sonya, if you can help Scorch..." the former ThunderClan apprentice started.

Sonya dipped her head. "Yes, but for that I need to talk to Scorch alone," Sonya's tone was obstinate and Boulderpaw dipped his head and wandered away to leave them in peace.

"So, Scorch, I've done some investigating since I left you two at the Clans. But, may I ask, has there been any change in what's been happening?"

Scorch shook her head.

"Well, that's okay. I think I figured it out, and I have a source that tells me I'm almost assuredly correct."

"So you know how to fix it?" Scorch asked.

Sonya purred and kinked her tail over her back. "Of course! I wouldn't call you if I didn't know that much. But its going to be a little difficult and it won't be an immediate cure. It will rest on you to continue to improve your own condition."

"What is my condition?" Scorch asked.

"Without going too much into detail, this is what I found. When you touched the sunlight in your spirit form your soul was sent spinning but you had enough control to reach your body again. Or mostly reach it. Part of you was sent back to the last place your soul had been since it was the most familiar, I assume you know what I mean by that?" Sonya's green eyes sharpened for a moment as she nodded.

"Continuing, your soul has been trying to reunite itself, so when you're the least guarded- that means when you are asleep- you subconsciously send yourself back there. Basically, your soul is trying to become whole again, but it can't do that since your body is here. So the only way to put an end to this is either for you to die for real, or for you to reclaim the missing part of your soul," Sonya's

announced.

Scorch stared at her with wide eyes. That sounded so crazy she didn't know where to start. But it wasn't impossible since it seemed that her powers weren't exactly normal. "And that's why I've been feeling like I do?"

Sonya nodded, "I think it's your emotions that were separated. That's not saying that you don't have any emotions, but you don't have the ones you usually had before, the ones you used the most are missing. That's why you're more likely to feel irritable when you didn't before. Though I think it's apathy that you mostly feel since that's the emotion you used the least," Sonya explained.

Scorch mulled that over for a moment and then stood up. "So how do we get these emotions back?"

Sonya purred, "I was waiting for you to ask that. It's going to be an adventure. You see, your soul should have personified in this other world; It should be a tangible object."

Scorch frowned, "Like a rock?"

"Or a feather. It will just have to be something that you can touch. If its in an odd place, say a snake hole, it'll be difficult to get to," Sonya laughed while Scorch cringed.

"Boulderpaw!" Sonya called for the tom.

"What?" he puffed, walking back to them.

"We're going to do a secret ritual and fix Scorch, you need to stand guard," Sonya mewed seriously. Scorch gave her a scathing glance but didn't say anything and curled down into a ball.

"Lets hurry this up."

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"Its certainly beautiful here," Sonya observed, her gaze flitting over the lake and around the horizons. They stood together in front of the lake near where ThunderClan's and ShadowClan's territory

would be.

"Yeah," Scorch purred, it was nice to be here with Sonya. Happiness filled her and she flicked a paw in the water to splash at the ginger and white cat. The she-cat jumped and purred, splashing both paws in the water. Scorch jumped away with a screech before the water could touch her and laughed as she ran down the shore to ThunderClan territory with Sonya on her paws.

"Got you!" Sonya raised her head triumphantly as she tackled her into the soft, warm sand.

"Ow! Okay! You win!" Scorch panted. They were nearly half-way through ThunderClan's shoreline already.

"Alright, back to business," Sonya stood up. "Where did you first wake up?"

Scorch sat and looked around. It was near sun-high and the sun floated in the clear sky. It was easy to see far into the distance, but she remembered that there had been snow when she'd first woken up. "It was just into the moors shore-line," she mewed.

Sonya nodded, "You lead."

Scorch followed the sandy shore past the woods, sometimes allowing herself to stray into the waves when her paws got too hot. "It was around here," she frowned. It looked so different without the snow.

"We'll look around for anything odd looking. Holler if you see anything." They separated at Sonya's order and Scorch strayed into the hills while Sonya stayed by the shore. Nothing caught her eye as she looked around the bare hills coated with yellow-green grass that billowed in the breeze.

Squinting her eyes against the sun, she could just see three moving silhouettes. Her heartbeat quickened as she saw a flash of bright orange. *Jasper?* Jumping, she ducked beneath the hills. As much as she missed her friends, she couldn't let them see her again.

"Scorch! Have you found anything?" Sonya was calling from the

shore.

Scorch raced over to her, "No, I didn't find anything at all." She frowned, wondering if she should mention that there were cats in the area. "Did you see anything?"

She sighed as Sonya shook her head. "Can you feel anything, Scorch? You should be able to sense it even a little," the white and ginger cat looked at her with green eyes full of trust. Scorch noticed that they were deep green again. *I never noticed, but are my eyes light green here?*

But Scorch closed her eyes and concentrated on the pit of her stomach where her emotions usually rose from. Was that just a little nagging she felt in her belly? Her eyes flickered open and she turned her head from side to side to pinpoint where it was coming from. Her eyes focused on the stream they had recently crossed to get to the moor side.

Her eyes lit up. "I think I know where it is," she mewed, turning to Sonya excitedly.

Sonya's eyes glowed, reflecting her enthusiasm. "You lead."

Scorch led Sonya in a hurried race up the stream. Passing through the forested area and darting across the exposed hillside. "Are you okay?" Sonya had pulled a little further ahead and paused to look back at her as she panted from clawing her way up one boulder at a time.

"Just- out- of- breath," Scorch sat down and hung her head as she gasped in air. She hadn't ever run so fast for so long up such a steep incline. But Sonya looked fine, purring as she sat beside her. Scorch glanced up at her, "I didn't realize you were so tall." She frowned, hadn't Sonya been her size the last time they'd seen each other?

Sonya let out a sigh, "You haven't been growing for a whole moon, that's why you're smaller than me."

Scorch blinked, what? "Why haven't I been growing?"

"Because you were constantly using your powers, or the equivalent

of that, at least. A part of you was always here, away from your body, so you couldn't grow. You were, however, able to heal and that was the most important thing," Sonya stood up and purred at her distressed face. "Don't worry, you'll still grow as big as ever, it will just take a little longer."

Scorch sighed, this was causing a lot more problems then she'd though. "Let's go-" She broke off as Sonya pushed her head down and ducked beside her, peering around a rock that blocked the view of the moor.

"What?" Scorch hissed. Was it a fox? Badger? She shivered at the thought of the large black and white beast.

"No, cats. We don't want to be seen and we definitely don't want to be delayed," Sonya murmured.

Curious, Scorch looked around the other side and she smiled sadly as she saw Song playing on the moor with a tom that looked like her, except he had yellow eyes. "Who's that tom?" she asked.

"That's Song's littermate," Scorch and Sonya both jumped and spun around. "Jasper!" Scorch stared with wide eyes at the orange tom. She hadn't even sensed him, and from Sonya's blank gaze, neither had she.

"Wing, what are you doing here?" He looked at her angrily.

"We are looking for something, but you need to leave," Sonya stepped forward.

Jasper narrowed his eyes, "I remember you. But I made a deal with Wing that she wouldn't come around here anymore, she has to respect that."

Scorch dropped her head, "I understand, I won't come around Song anymore," she murmured sadly.

"Yes, don't worry about that. This will be the last time you see either of us," Sonya mewed crisply. "Now, shoo!"

Jasper scowled at the kit. "You'd better not come around again!" he

snapped at Sonya.

"Come along now," Sonya nodded at her and started up the slope again.

Scorch turned to scramble after her, "I guess this is goodbye?" Jasper's mew stopped her. It was steady, but it glinted with sadness.

She turned to look at him and dropped her gaze. "It's better that I don't come around anymore," she murmured. *This is not my time.*

Jasper nodded his head once and looked up at the stars. "I'll miss our meetings," he mewed as she turned away.

Scorch looked back at him and her eyes started to blur. "I will too," she mewed softly. She looked after Sonya's disappearing tail-tip before darting to Jasper and gave him a quick lick on the cheek. "Goodbye," she mewed huskily. Then she turned and raced after Sonya. She paused when she caught up and looked down the slope. Jasper was still sitting there, staring at her. It felt like the first time she had left him and there eyes had meant, confusion and questions flashing between them both. But this time there was no question, just a cold answer.

I'll miss him, he was a good friend, and with time I think he could have been something more.

...

"Is this the place?" Sonya's whisper was awed as she looked around the delicate hollow that sheltered what would one day be called the Moonpool. A sandy pathway led to the rocky dip where the water pooled, fed by the wavering waterfall on the other side of the hollow that entered and exited the hollow in perfect silence.

"I'm pretty sure," Scorch breathed. It was as beautiful as she remembered, cascading water that could reflect the entirety of the sky in all its timeless glory.

Sonya purred and looked at her, "I think you're right; Your missing pieces are here. Go touch the water."

Scorch walked down the slope, the dimples she remembered there being weren't in the ground and it was much softer. With a shiver, she realized she was helping to form those paw-prints. She knelt down near the water and could feel the churning of her emotions thrumming below the water.

Someday, this water will be the gate to the sky. But right now, its the gate to my soul. She closed her eyes and touched her nose to the water. It was startlingly cold but the ice caressed her and flowed through her with a pure shock of energy, like dazzling stars shooting through her. She found herself falling into the water and she disappeared beneath the surface without a sound as Sonya gasped behind her.

Submerged, she could feel it. She was soaking into her soul and it was all connecting. One emotion to another connected- old feelings, new feelings- whirling blindly through her. It wrapped her in a warm cocoon that slowly crumbled around her.

Scorch broke the surface and purred at the worried looking Sonya. "It worked!" She hadn't known she'd been missing anything, but now that she was whole again, she couldn't believe she hadn't been able to realize such a big part of her had been missing.

Sonya purred as well as she helped Scorch scramble out of the pool. "If that's it then, all we have to do is return to our bodies. This time, though, we'll avoid the sun!"

Chapter 41: Micawber

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"You're back to normal?" Boulderpaw stared at her with wide eyes.

Scorch purred and swatted at his muzzle. "Yes, why do you look so shocked? Did you doubt me?" she teased.

Boulderpaw looked away, his eyes darkening. The gray shadows of dusk swallowed the shore and the overcast sky shed a few fitful flurries over the frozen lakefront as the temperature of the air dropped steadily. "No, but I didn't think it would be so easy," he narrowed his eyes and Scorch laughed at his pessimism.

"Well, I did mention that it's not an immediate fix, but I don't think it will be hard for Scorch to not fully recover," Sonya mewed from her side.

"What do I have to do?" Scorch looked at Sonya's bright green eyes.

The ginger and white she-cat leaned closer to whisper in her ear, "You just need to use your recovered emotions. But I don't think that will be difficult for a cat like you."

Scorch nodded- with her happy optimism returned, plans for the future unrolled before her eyes like golden fields waiting to be tread upon. "Well, what are we sitting around here for? We've got work to do!" Scorch jumped around Boulderpaw.

"Okay, but, Sonya? Are you coming with us?" the gray tom narrowed his eyes at the she-cat.

Scorch paused and glanced back at her friend. She had so much she wanted to ask her, so much she wanted to do with her. She felt that it would have to wait though; Sonya wouldn't come back with them. "I'll see you soon, I hope?" Scorch asked when Sonya didn't answer.

"Of course! I'll be in the area, if you need anything just call!" Sonya purred cheerily. It almost sounded forced.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Scorch looked at her friend closely. All feelings were blocked off from Sonya, but she could read loneliness in a cat's eyes as well as anyone.

"I'm fine," Sonya waved her tail. "I'm not a Clan cat and I like it that way. But whenever you want to chat, I'll be waiting, Scorch." Scorch watched her friend jog down the shoreline, heading for the RiverClan border and disappearing from sight in the blowing snow.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Scorch looked at Boulderpaw in surprise at the concern in his mew.

"She'll be fine," Scorch looked after her, shivering at the sudden gust of snow. "But we should get back to camp before we get lost in this weather!"

They hurried through the pine forest, Scorch keeping pace with Boulderpaw's long strides as she felt energy thrum through her. Her thoughts whirled and her purrs sounded erratically as she made up for more than a moon of lost joy.

"What's been going on in the camp? I don't really remember..." she looked away in embarrassment, despite her efforts, she hadn't been able to rouse any curiosity and now it clawed at her almost painfully.

Boulderpaw glanced at her quickly. "That was definitely a quick fix. It's as if you were never gone," he pulsed with a moment of emotion but then shook himself and carried on. "A lot of things have been happening, but nothing has been done," he mewed, quickening his pace as the snow started invading under the heavy cover of the pine trees.

"What does that mean?" she puffed, entering into a trot to keep up.

"Well, if you want the latest gossip; two she-cats are expecting kits," he glanced at her.

Scorch paused in her thoughts for a moment, "I know who one of

those is, and the other?"

"Newtlight is expecting Frogfoot's kits," Boulderpaw mewed. *I knew it,* Scorch purred to herself. She'd foreseen that happening for quite a while. "Yep, it looks like ShadowClan is doing its best to replace itself," Boulderpaw's tone was troubled.

Scorch pricked her ears, "What happened?"

"Nothing," he flashed his blue eyes at her and she understood.

"And that's the problem?" she guessed.

Boulderpaw nodded, "Nightwing is dead and his cats are scattered. They want to split groups again, become two different Clans again. Sunstar isn't allowing it though and no cat has come outright and challenged him. Yet."

Scorch nodded, "I understand why, but it is not a good idea."

"Why?" Boulderpaw looked at her, eyes wide. "That's why we were fighting, right? So that the Clans can go back to normal?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

Scorch dipped her head, "True, but you need to remember that they hardly number a Clan combined. Besides that, if some cats move into RiverClan territory- territory that has been left vacant by the Clans- Pinefur is sure to notice and he'll have an easy time defeating both of the Clans if they're divided. He could actually probably defeat them united, so I think that Pinefur should be defeated before they separate."

They walked in silence for a few moments before Boulderpaw dipped her head. "I understand your reasoning. I see your mind is as sharp as ever," he admitted. "But I don't think that's going to be enough to content the others. ShadowClan doesn't want to be under the rule of a RiverClan leader, and RiverClan doesn't want to live in ShadowClan't territory."

Scorch bobbed her head, "I already have a plan for that."

They reached camp just as the snow started coming down heavily

and Scorch headed with Boulderpaw to the apprentices den. "Flickertail said I was fine, he won't mind," Scorch murmured when Boulderpaw shot her a worried look.

He nodded and they slipped into the den silently; the deserted clearing stirred only as the guard finished his perimeter check and returned to his post. Inside the den, Flashpaw snored lightly- a bundle of black fluff. Scorch looked around for soft moss to scrap together a makeshift nest but the ground was only covered with pine needles and she sighed.

"Here," Boulderpaw grumbled, shifting in his moss nest to make room for her.

"Thanks," she whispered, slipping inside the nest and curling tight against him to share warmth. She closed her eyes with a contented sigh. *This is a good end to a productive day.*

.....

Scorch was up at dawn the next morning, blissfully watching the sunrise that painted the retreating clouds pink and gold. She took a deep breath of the frosty air and noticed that, although it was still cold, it held a wetter note that promised a change was upcoming. *Soon, it will be just like that other world.* A pang of sadness follow, she wouldn't lie and say that getting her emotions back had made that world any less better. She had so many precious memories, but she also knew she could never return to it like she had before.

For one, Sonya had told her that now she wouldn't go there subconsciously. And it was true, her sleep had been undisturbed. And she didn't know how to get there by herself. Besides that, she knew that world was a special one and shouldn't be used just for her own selfish happiness. *I have this world anyways, and it's just as good!*

She lifted her chin proudly and watched the early risers greet the day with large yawns and sleepy murmurs. Her eyes spotted Painted and Raven exiting the warriors den and her gaze sharpened as Raven spotted her immediately. The black she-cat nudged her sister and Painted glanced over toward her, eyes widening but she didn't

move.

Cats rustled out of dens and Scorch watched them with the hungering and wary curiousness that a wanderer has when they return home. Thistlebranch stretched in the weak light, her tortoiseshell fur fluffed up against the cold but her eyes bright in the shadow of the pine trees. Webclaw appeared out of the warriors den and paused to use a hind-paw to scratch behind his ears, his whiskers twitching as he stopped and looked out at the camp entrance, the hunting gaze sharpening in his eyes.

Scorch gave a small sigh as Boulderpaw padded up behind her. "I missed this so much, and I never knew it," her eyes clouded as she remembered wanting nothing more then to leave. The beauty in leisure and victory had returned with a more enthralling aura than ever.

She stood up, "I'm going to go talk to Sunstar about a few things," she mewed, heading over to the boulder den. A few cats turned to watch her, but the confidence in her walk silenced any rising murmurs. Scorch was back, and they would realize it sooner rather than later.

"Sunstar?" she mewed outside the den.

"Hmm? Come in," the great yellow leader was only just getting out of his nest with scraps of moss clinging to his shoulders. He shook them off and his eyes widened when he saw her. "Scorch!"

"Yes, yes," Scorch waved her paw as he moved to greet her. "Sit down, I want to talk to you about some things."

The look in Sunstar's eyes changed immediately from pleased to wary. "You need to know," he warned, "That with Nightwing defeated, your power is no more than you are due."

Scorch twitched her tail, not bothered at all. "I hope I'm due quite a bit then."

"And if you're not?" he growled.

"Then I'll have to manage without power," Scorch mewed, raising

her gaze to meet Sunstar's squarely. "But I didn't come here so early to cut teeth. I wanted to talk about how the ShadowClan and RiverClan separation can be made."

Sunstar got to his paws, "That is a very bad idea," he warned. "Both groups are so small, the entire Clan would hardly be a force against a fox or two. We have to wait until they grow larger."

Scorch dipped her head, "I was thinking of Pinefur more than foxes in regards to threats. It would hardly be a battle with him, perhaps he would just slaughter every cat, he may not think the fur is worth it and then he could just take the territories as it pleased him. Know full well I do not think it prudent for the cats to separate- yet."

Sunstar sat down and looked down at her sternly. "Then what is there to talk about?"

Scorch lifted her muzzle, "Don't be daft. Even if the two Clans live together, wouldn't it be a good idea to start preparing them for separation?"

Sunstar flattened his ears uncomfortably. "What would you suggest?" he mewed gruffly.

Scorch leaned forward, "You are a Clan cat; you should know better than I what is necessary for a Clan to have. A leader, a deputy, and a medicine-cat. RiverClan has a leader and medicine-cat, but no deputy; ShadowClan doesn't have a single thing. Organization will calm the cats and keep order. Plus, familiar rituals might be sweet right about now; exercising a Clans full power."

Sunstar was looking thoughtful. "I suppose that could work, but ShadowClan doesn't even have a cat trained to be a medicine-cat and if we divide the power so much, strife is bound to occur while we live together."

Scorch dipped her head, "There will be difficulties," she conceded, "But I trust that every cat will be willing to work together a little longer until the survival of the Clans is assured."

Sunstar nodded, "Alright, I'll talk to the cats about it. The full moon

is coming up, maybe I'll ask Flickertail to go talk to StarClan..."

Scorch nodded and stood up. She felt pleased with herself; It had been a successful meeting, even after she'd been so reclusive for a moon. She turned to leave, "I'll let you get to that then," she mewed.

Sunstar stood up as she left, "Yes, thank you, Scorch. And, it's good that you're back," his purr was warm and Scorch couldn't help but feel content.

Out in the cold air again, she quickly headed for the medicine-cat den. She assumed Flickertail would want an explanation for her disappearance from the den yesterday. The cream dappled tom was sitting at his herb stocks, busily counting up his remaining store. His tail flicked quickly, but he didn't seem particularly worried or irked.

"Flickertail?" she mewed, "I was wondering if it was alright for me to sleep in the apprentices den now that I'm all healed."

Flickertail snorted, "Next time, ask before you do it. And yes, you're just fine," he mewed crisply.

"Sorry," Scorch dropped her head. She couldn't recall why, but she remembered that Flickertail had gotten more and more annoyed with her this past moon. "Do you need help with anything?" she offered, hoping she could make up for whatever behavior she'd offended him with.

Flickertail didn't turn. "No, why don't you go practice stalking. You've been stuck in camp for too long, get a warrior to help you," he mewed, bending carefully over the precious small store of tansy.

Scorch sighed and nodded, "Okay." He wasn't ready to forgive or forget yet. She just hoped he would before the Clans split up. She liked the RiverClan medicine-cat; He was kind and fun and had been the first to appreciate her skills besides Boulderpaw and Sunstar. *I wonder what I did... but I don't remember.*

It was like a ghost trailing her, when she turned, there was nothing there but she could feel it following her. She paused as she padded

outside the den, actually, that feeling is very strong. She shivered. Once you were aware of something, it never quite disappeared again until it was forgotten.

Glancing over her shoulder, she shuffled across the clearing toward the apprentices den. She could see the sun rising through the pine branches, but the camp already seemed mostly empty as cats left to hunt or patrol or do whatever. She frowned, *this is where a deputy would be handy. Disorganization leaves the camp vulnerable.*

She fell back as she bumped into a cat that stepped out of the warriors den suddenly. "Uh, sorry," she apologized as the cat turned toward her. Scorch's eyes widened and she felt nervous; She didn't know this cat. Carefully, she backed away a few steps. Thinking carefully she realized that she'd seen this cat before, but where? No name came to mind and she feared that perhaps she had amnesia.

The cat was dark brown-almost russet toned- with white patches and clear blue eyes. It was obviously a she-cat and looked as disconcerted as she was. "Oh!" the cat spoke, eyes clearing. "You're the kit that everyone was worried about!" she smiled and it was warm and friendly, but something in Scorch held back a little as she dipped her head.

"Excuse me," she murmured, trying to slide past. But the she-cat stopped her.

"What's your name?" the cat purred. Scorch was sure she must have hear it by now and was just trying to make a conversation.

"Scorch."

"It's a very nice name. My name is Sky," the cat introduced herself.

Scorch's fur prickled, that wasn't a Clan name! When had she joined? Where was she from? Scorch frowned. "When did you join the Clans?"

Sky tilted her head to the side as she thought, "I started living here about a moon ago, but I was working for the Clan at least two moons before then."

Scorch's head spun, when had this happened? She glanced at Sunstar's den, she was sure he had something to do with this. Frowning, she tried to remember what she'd heard the last moon. It was hard, only bits and pieces connected and it all felt far-away and half forgotten like a dream that ended the moment she opened her eyes.

Wait, didn't Boulderpaw say that Sunstar recruited rouges to help fight against Nightwing? If that's true, is she one of those rogues? Scorch looked at Sky, the brown she-cat was still smiling and watching her.

"Um, were you one of the cats that Sunstar recruited to fight Nightwing?" Scorch asked politely, but she went straight to the point.

Sky nodded vigorously, "Let's go sit down and I'll tell you all about it. You've been sick, I bet you haven't been told everything."

Scorch followed as Sky led her over to a bare spot of ground next to a tree. Scorch could see a gap in the barrier and recognized it as the alcove she'd been kept in. She shivered, it had turned from prison to camp in a heartbeat.

"Okay, so I first met Sunstar last green-leaf with my brother, Parsley, while we were out hunting. He told us stories and stuff about a Clan he came from and we started visiting him. Then we met another cat from the Clans who was looking for cats to be part of his Clan, but he wasn't really nice so we didn't want to join, but when we told Sunstar about it he asked us if we'd do him a favor and just pretend to be a part of his group until he could return to the forest and kind of spy for him. I wanted to but Parsley didn't so-"

Scorch listened dully as the she-cat chatted. *I wonder if I can sneak away...* But the she-cat's eyes were fixed on her so she was stuck in her spot. "So then around leaf-bare Sunstar finally tells us that the plan is in motion and by then there were a lot of cats in the group, some he'd recruited others he hadn't. But we didn't talk about it so no cat ever found out. Then just over a moon ago he said that Nightiwng was going to attack him with the group we were in and that we were to fight on his side. It was really exciting and we won!

Some cats died and you were hurt awful bad... sorry about that," Sky looked at her with big, apologetic eyes.

Scorch started as she remembered where she'd seen Sky before. *She was with Crowpelt's group when Nightwing killed me! Er, almost killed me*. She frowned, couldn't they have fought to save her then? All the trouble she went through that last moon could have been avoided.

"So after the battle Sunstar invited you to join him?" she guessed.

Sky nodded, "Yep! Us and all the other rogues. Not all of us took up the offer, my best friend didn't but... I do like living in a group. You're almost never alone!" Sky's cheerfulness, as friendly as it was, seemed a bit off to Scorch. Not in a suspicious way, but as if she were using it cover up pain.

Scorch knew this emotion, so well disguised that she barely felt it rippling beneath the happiness. "Are you happy here?" Scorch asked quietly, staring Sky in the eyes with a quiet gaze.

Sky glanced away, "I miss some of my friends and not all the Clan cats like us. But I'm sure they'll get used to it eventually, and I still have my brother."

Scorch shuffled her paws, the feeling had grown at the end. "What was your friend like? The one you miss?"

Sky looked at her and hesitated, "She was smart and serious, but she could be fun when she wanted to. She would always find time to spend with me and Parsley," Sky's tone ached with longing.

Scorch nodded, *She's talking about her sister, her sister decided not to join the Clan and she's worried for her and misses her*. But it wasn't Scorch's place to butt in. "I'm sure she's happier finding her own path in the forest. Who knows? Maybe she'll come and visit sometime?" Scorch got to her paws and dipped her head. "I'm sorry, I've got a cat to find."

She glanced around the clearing, checking that Flickertail and Sunstar weren't out, and ducked out the entrance. She wasn't interested in waiting around for things to get done. Breathing in the

scents, she detected the one she wanted.

Following it through the tall pine trees, she crossed the scent trail of Painted and Raven. She paused, looking longingly in the direction they'd passed recently but shook her head. *I can talk to them later*. She continued following the scent trail until she spied gray fur between the trunks, pausing in the thick shadows of a pine tree.

Boulderpaw was crouched, stalking a thrush that was hopping over the needle-sprinkled snow. She frowned as the bird fluttered away towards her. *Did he see me?* She wasn't about to let a piece of prey get away in her wondering!

She leaped and the bird was knocked to the ground. But she hadn't touched it. Her tail flicked as Flashpaw caught the thrush between her forepaws and killed it. Scorch remained in the shadows, unseen as Boulderpaw padded up to the black apprentice.

"Nice leap. I guess RiverClan cats can jump," he grumbled, a grudging tone of respect in his voice.

Flashpaw purred and flicked her tail over Boulderpaw's ears. She had her back to Scorch so her facial expressions were a mystery, but that purr was deep. *When did they become such good friends?* Scorch pushed away a flicker of annoyance.

"Your training has really helped me. And don't forget, RiverClan cats do have to hunt on land when the water freezes like this, we don't do ice-fishing, " Flashpaw laughed, sitting down.

"Do you want to keep hunting?" Boulderpaw looked around, his gaze flicking over her without stopping.

Scorch could feel annoyance bubbling up again. *He never invited me to go hunting, I always had to drag him out of camp!* She grumbled to herself, but she wasn't going to make a scene in front of her friends.

She waited for them to come to an agreement that Flashpaw would take the thrush back to camp so that it could be eaten while it was warm and then they'd regroup to hunt again. As soon as the black she-cat was gone, Scorch padded toward Boulderpaw.

"Time to go," she mewed.

Boulderpaw glanced at her, "Go where?" he sighed. She noticed he sounded much less enthusiastic then when he'd asked Flashpaw to continue hunting.

Scorch smiled, she wasn't going to allow these stupid feelings to keep her excitement down. "A place that you know well," she purred.

She turned to walk away. "And what if I don't want to go?" Boulderpaw called.

Scorch laughed as she glanced over her shoulder. "Do you need to ask? I'll just go alone then!" He'd said that countless times and had always ended up coming after her. Sure enough, his heavy paw steps stomped behind her as she pushed through the snow, heading in a straight line for her destination.

"Why are we going *there*?" Boulderpaw sounded disgusted and curious.

Scorch didn't look at him. "Why not? Isn't that the next place to go?"

"Yeah, but, we'll be in big trouble if any cat catches us. And I mean going-to-the-after-life trouble," he growled.

Scorch flicked her tail, "If we're quiet, no cat will find out. Besides, RiverClan and ShadowClan aren't strong enough to free them single-pawed. The brunt of the fight will have to be done by them." She stopped. "We're here."

Boulderpaw pulled up along her and drank in the scents hungrily. There wasn't really a change in scenery, just a frozen stream in a ditch. But it marked the entrance to a whole other world.

"Alright," Scorch took a step back and dipped her head toward Boulderpaw. "You lead, get us as close to ThunderClan's camp as you can without us being spotted."

"That's going to be hard," he grumbled. "And even though its my territory, you'd probably be better treated."

"Well, then that's more incentive not to get caught!"

He rolled his eyes at her and jumped the ditch, she followed and her paws hit ThunderClan ground for the first time in a long while. Boulderpaw looked even more nostalgic, his blue eyes cloudy with memories. "Come on! Day dream later!" she whispered, nudging his flank.

He nodded and lead her silently along several zigzagging trails through the snowy forest. They seemed to be prey trails and not the ones usually used by cats. Even with the leaf-bare deadness, there was plenty of screening to hide them. Tree stumps, logs, dead bushes thick with twigs, boulders that rose out of the snow, and little clefts and ditches that they could duck into.

Several times they came within close proximity of other cats so that they could hear their mrrows, but they never actually saw any cat. "This way," Boulderpaw whispered. She could scent that they were close to camp, the cat scent was heavy and noise buzzed in the cold air. He led her up a steep slope and darted across a bare patch of grass.

"Alright," she panted, joining him in the cover of a bush. "Where next?"

"Nowhere next, the camp is just down there," Boulderpaw pointed with his tail and Scorch peered out to see a steep drop a few mouse-lengths away. Sheer rock lined the side of camp they were above and the other was only a third of the height and looked like it could be scrambled up if necessary.

"Nice camp, but wouldn't trap you in case of an ambush?" Sure the opposite side could be scrambled up, but the wall of brambles would tear any cat to shreds if they were much bigger than her.

Boulderpaw shrugged, "We aren't attacked often enough to move the camp and unless you know where the entrance is, you're in for a fall."

Scorch nodded and concentrated on the camp. Cats milled about below but they were too far away to make out most of the words.

But she spotted two familiar pelts. She nudged Boulderpaw, "There's Moonpaw!" she whispered, flicking her tail at the dark gray pelt. Even from this distance the ice blue eyes glowed coldly.

"Yeah, but be quiet and don't move. If we can see them, they can see us," Boulderpaw growled.

"Sorry."

Scorch's eyes flicked to the other familiar pelt. A silver-blue she-cat with dark gray patching her pelt like mini storm clouds and white paws that molded into the snow. "There's Skypool," she whispered again.

"Yes, I see her..." Boulderpaw sounded distracted.

"What is it?" she looked at him.

"I just don't see..."

"Who?" Scorch pressed against him, scanning the pelts below them.

"I don't see Firepaw," he muttered.

"Who?" Scorch stared at him with wide eyes.

Boulderpaw shrugged, "He was probably my best friend before I left. He was an apprentice, about Leafpaw's age..." He swallowed. "He was the one that was forced to kill her."

Scorch's fur stood on end. "How could you be friends with a cat that killed a Clanmate?" she snarled.

"Shut up!" Boulderpaw spat. "They'll hear you, and he had no choice. Either he did it or Pinefur would have killed all of us!"

Scorch looked away, feeling the heat of anger flush through her. She unsheathed and sheathed her claws irritably. "Whatever, he's probably just on patrol or in a den. If he followed Pinefur's order, I doubt he would be killed."

Boulderpaw nodded. "So, what now?"

"We talk to one of them, obviously. We need to do what we did with ShadowClan and WindClan and let them know that they'll receive outside help to rebel," she mewed.

Boulderpaw frowned, "Who are we going to ask?"

She glanced at him, "I was thinking Skypool, but I also thought that you would be able to guess who the most loyal one to a rebellion would be."

"Moonpaw then," he mewed.

Scorch glanced at him, "Okay, but I thought you didn't like her?"

"I don't, but she's right behind us."

Scorch jumped and looked behind them; There stood the dark gray she-cat with eyes glaring at them like chips of sharp ice. Hadn't she just been down below them? "Moonpaw," Scorch dipped her head awkwardly.

"Get out. Both of you, right now. If you want to live," Moonpaw narrowed her eyes.

"Like you would hurt us," Boulderpaw scoffed.

Moonpaw bared her teeth. "I would let Scorch go with a few scratches. But you- you disgusting flea-bag- you ought to have your entrails spread over this entire forest," the words were snarled with such venom that Scorch was shocked.

"Moonpaw-" Scorch started calmly, stepping forward.

"Stay out of this!" Moonpaw shifted her cold gaze on her. "That cat abandoned his Clan-mates to our horrible lives and left us to suffer for his disloyalty!" Moonpaw lifted her tail and Scorch felt a hard lump in her belly as she saw that the tip was missing.

"Did Pinefur do that?" Boulderpaw asked huskily.

Moonpaw nodded coldly. "But I was lucky. Our mother wasn't. He blinded her in one eye. I hope you don't think you can come back,

because I'll never forgive you for that. After I forced myself to stay just so that you and mother wouldn't get hurt, then you leave! It was worse then betrayal!"

Scorch remained silent and frozen in the face of this cold fury. But she was aware of the cats that were being attracted by the noise. "We need to move, now," she growled in Boulderpaw's ears. He looked at her blankly; She didn't think she'd ever seen a cat look so hollow as he did now. "But we also need her," she nodded at Moonpaw.

Moonpaw blinked, "*What*?!" her growl was cut off as Scorch leaped for her and knocked her onto her back, winded so that she couldn't yell.

"Sorry, but we need to talk." Scorch took out the small leaf packet that she'd carefully carried between her claws and forced six poppy seeds into Moonpaw's mouth.

"What are you doing to me?!" Moonpaw's screech was broken off as her eyes grew hazy.

"What did you do?" Boulderpaw's mew was aghast as he watched his sister grow limp.

"She's just sleeping. But we need to get out of here before cats find us. Help me carry her, quickly!" Scorch shifted her shoulder beneath the unconscious cat and Boulderpaw joined her a hesitant moment later. They quickly ran stride for stride with Moonpaw supported between them until the calls and cries from camp died away to incoherent babbling that gradually died in the frozen forest.

"Take us the quickest way out of the territory," Scorch mewed.

"That's what I'm doing!" Boulder hissed.

Scorch was taken back. "Just calm down, we're doing just fine. No cat saw us and our scents will die quickly in the cold." She didn't need to add that the foliage would hide them and that there was already so many paw-prints that theirs wouldn't make a difference.

"I'm not worried about that! And I will not calm down! We just

kidnapped my sister, for StarClan sake! Of course I'm freaking out!" Boulderpaw's words were hissed and growled while his eyes were wide and wild.

"We didn't kidnap her," Scorch mewed steadily, matching his increased pace. "And if we did, then it is for the survival of two Clans and that is well worth it."

Boulderpaw grumbled something and Scorch could sense he was still uneasy but he didn't speak again until they crossed the border into rogue territory. Scorch looked around, faintly recognizing the area as just north of the beech tree was where she had once met Leafpaw. *It seems like a long time ago, but it was only a few moons past.* She sadly remembered the red she-cat that could breathe no more.

"When will she wake up?" Boulderpaw asked, carefully sliding his sister's sleeping body to the ground.

"I gave her a heavy dose, but she should wake up before dusk," Scorch mewed, looking at the sky. It was crowded with gray clouds but she could tell it was around sun-high from the way the light angled.

"I hope no cat find us," he grumbled, pulling his sister into a comfortable resting position in the shelter of a holly bush.

"I don't think they will, but I'll keep watch. You just look out for your sister." Scorch padded around the small area. The holly bush was part of a thicket of other hazel, bracken, and bramble bushes that rested in a slight depression in the snowy ground. It looked like it would be a good place for prey, but Scorch didn't smell any prey scent. *We probably already scared them away, maybe they'll come out later if we're quiet.*

She turned to the top of the depression that was only as high as her shoulder from the lowest point, and crouched beneath the dead tendrils of a fern bush in the shadow of a thick oak tree. Here she could see the edges of the ThunderClan border, unnoticeable in the thick of the undergrowth except for a well tread path in the snow.

Scorch's eyes flicked restlessly through the thick bushes and logs and stones, was that a movement she saw? Her eyes flashed but it was only a twig broken off a branch by a careless magpie. She shifted her paws uncomfortably, was it not suffocating to be able to see no more than a few tail-lengths around you? But somehow, it also seemed warm and relaxing. Was it like a cover that protected her from dangers? Did the brambles catch the unpleasant thoughts and tear them from her? Whatever it was, the warm tang in the air and the distant buzz of noise was a nice change from the sharp and silent pine woods.

"*It is a nice change of pace, isn't it*?" Scorch jumped, her fur standing on end. Chills slithered down her spine and leaked into her bones. That voice was at once painfully familiar and horrifying. It spoke to her like Sonya did, but it was definitely not Sonya. It dripped with bitter humor and cold feeling.

"*Over here*," the voice growled and Scorch turned her gaze slowly toward a direction that seemed suddenly swamped in moving shadows. Her heart beat painfully fast when a pair of blood-red eyes blinked out of the shadows. "*Good*," the voice purred with amusement as her horrified gaze locked with the scarlet one. "*I've waited such a long time to meet you. Don't keep me waiting any longer*," the shadow seemed to move toward, withering like fog chased in swirls by the wind. Scorch felt stuck in bleak terror, but some part of her rejoiced, some part of her longed for this. *I know I'm terrified, but why do I long for it?*

Chapter 42: Time

Chapter 42: Time

The black shadows swarmed like billowing clouds as they moved toward her. Scorch stood stock-still with her breath coming in short pants as her faint gaze locked with the imposing red eyes. It came closer slowly, the immediate area around the red eyes cloaked with the shadows that shifted with a silent sound.

"You are looking quite well, Scorch," the shadows spoke- now only three tail-lengths away.

"How do you know my name?" she croaked, her mouth dry. But her heart beat excitedly and she felt something stirring deep within her. She recognized the feeling, as she watched the shadows creep even closer, it was the feeling she got when she used her power to look at her mirages. She glanced quickly around; There were no mirages.

She looked back at the shadow and backed up a pace when she saw the faint outlines of a black cat in the middle of the shadows, the eyes belonged to the cat. The shadow cat stood nose-to-nose with her, *"I've always known you,"*

Scorch trembled as she crouched beneath the cat. She searched the red gaze and sensed for feeling. But the eyes were veiled and no sensation came from the shadows. "Then why don't I know you?" she forced herself to meet the gaze, but she felt a fiercer flash from her soul when she did.

"Because I have never chosen to make myself known to you until now. But it is time for you to know me," Scorch blinked as the shadows became sharper and shrunk down into the outline of the cat until only a black cat stood in front of her- but she could see the tails of the shadows whisking off his pelt.

"Who are you," Scorch forced her legs to straighten. "And why do I feel like I know you?"

The black cat dipped his head, "My name," he announced, "Is Time. You feel as if you know me because I am a part of you or- more precisely- you are a part of me."

Scorch shivered- she didn't understand and she didn't think she wanted to understand. But she was drawn to it, like a moth to a flame. No feeling could explain it, no words could describe it; She just knew it. "How am I part of you?" she rasped.

The red eyes narrowed, "You share my burden, just as Sonya does."

Scorch's ears pricked, "You know Sonya?"

Time dipped his head, "Indeed, I trained her to use her abilities. That is why she knows so much more than you. She is also well aware of one important fact," Time narrowed his eyes until on a thin red line was visible.

"And what would that be?" Scorch shivered and took another step back but the uneven ground tripped her and she fell back on her rump.

Time glowered over her, "She knows that if either of you die, the living one receives the powers that belonged to the deceased."

Scorch's breath quickened suddenly. Thoughts of Song flashed in her mind, *Sonya was the one that tried to kill you*. Thoughts of Sonya flashed in her mind, *you are the one with the greater power*. And just now, Time's words, *if one of you dies, the surviving one receives all of the powers- and Sonya knows it.* Was it even possible that Sonya really had tried to kill her? She'd discarded the thought as Song's troubled musings, but if this was true, was Sonya trying to get her powers?

She shook her head angrily, *No! She wouldn't do that. Besides, why would she want my powers?* Scorch looked up at Time again. "What are you saying?" she growled.

Time opened his mouth, red eyes gleaming. "Scorch! Moonpaw's awake!" Scorch jumped around at Boulderpaw's shout and when she turned back, Time was gone and the forest was as cold and empty

as it had been.

"Okay!" she called back to Boulderpaw. With one last glance, she plunged down the small slope to the holly bush where Moonpaw was groggily wriggling around. "I don't think she'll be running anywhere," she mewed as Boulderpaw blocked the path back to ThunderClan territory.

He shook his head, "I wouldn't put it past her," he grumbled, but his eyes were nervous. She had never seen him look so unsure. His tail flicked anxiously, his eyes flashed around, and his fur prickled along his spine.

Scorch shook her head with a sigh and looked back at Moonpaw. Her blue eyes flickered open and her gray shoulders heaved as she pushed herself into a wobbly sitting position. "You cats wont git awee wisth dis," Moonpaw's words slurred as she swayed back and forth.

Scorch supported the wonky apprentice with her shoulder and Moonpaw shook her head. "Go away."

"Shh, just relax. We want to talk to you about defeating Pinefur and freeing the Clans. We are here to help," she blinked with honest eyes at Moonpaw.

The gray cat snorted and shook her head, "How could two rogues help?" she coughed out.

Scorch's eyes gleamed, "We are more then just two," she promised.

Moonpaw glanced at her, ice eyes sharpening with interest. "How many?"

"Enough," Scorch mewed. "But we will need all the ThunderClan and WindClan cats to help and then victory is assured." She wasn't actually sure of that, and from the glance Boulderpaw gave her, he wasn't either.

Moonpaw looked at her for a long moment then sighed and nodded her head, "I do hate Pinefur more then I do you two. Fine, tell me your plan," she scowled.

Scorch nodded at Boulderpaw and he stepped forward. His sister glared at him coldly but he began, "We need you to kind of start spreading the word that there is going to be a rebellion and get cats on our side in ThunderClan. We'll settle the date once all the cats know."

Moonpaw stared at her brother and snorted, "That's a suicide mission," she snarled. "Pinefur is crafty- *you* should know that," she flicked her tail scornfully at Boulderpaw. "He has traitors among the Clan cats that no cat knows about. If I were to tell the wrong cat I'd be killed, and that's that. Why do think all of the rebellion ideas were stopped so early? Our own father was killed that way," Moonpaw narrowed her eyes at Boulderpaw.

"Moonpaw, calm down. We just need to figure out who the traitors are and avoid them," Scorch mewed.

"Easier said then done," the gray she-cat snorted.

"No, not really. Keep the groups small at first, only cats you absolutely trust. Your mother, perhaps, and the medicine-cat. Then they can tell cats that only they completely trust and so on, it will move slowly but that's the price for safety," Scorch soothed.

Moonpaw flicked her tail, "It will still take only one wrong move to tell the wrong cat for it to fall down on us."

"Not necessarily. Have little meetings with other rebellion cats and when you introduce a new cat, take them to the meeting before you tell them. That way they can't get straight to Pinefur. And then have a cat tail them to make sure they're loyal. If you find them trying to tell Pinefur, do something about it," Scorch waved her tail.

Moonpaw and Boulderpaw eyed her suspiciously though. "And what would we do about them? We couldn't put them under guard or stop them," Moonpaw growled.

Scorch shrugged, "Kill them, then."

Boulderpaw whipped his tail, "We're not going to kill our Clan-mates!"

"I agree- unfortunately," Moonpaw growled.

Scorch scowled, "If they're working for Pinefur and are going to kill you, they're not really your Clan-mates. I think once a cat has an intention to kill, they forfeit their own right to life."

Moonpaw and Boulderpaw shared an uneasy glance. "Its not warrior-like, but I guess they aren't either," Moonpaw grumbled.

Scorch nodded, "Hopefully, that won't happen. But we have to be prepared."

Moonpaw sighed and nodded, "So you just want me to start telling cats that there is going to be a rebellion? How will I convince them? They're too wary to just jump on board with a rebellion idea after so many have failed."

"If you really trust them, tell them that ShadowClan and RiverClan will help. If not, just say that there are outside cats ready to help," Scorch mewed.

Moonpaw's ears pricked, "Aren't ShadowClan and RiverClan under Nightwing's control?"

"They *were,"* Boulderpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded, "That's what we were doing the last three moons."

Moonpaw eyed Boulderpaw, "That's where you went?" she growled.

Boulderpaw dipped his head, looking ashamed.

"At least you weren't just abandoning the Clans," Moonpaw sniffed. "Shame you saved two different Clans first though."

"Nightwing had less cats then Pinefur, so it was easier to do from scratch. But now that we have a force, Pinefur can be taken down," Scorch explained.

Moonpaw shrugged, "We can just hope that," she heaved herself to her paws and walked stiffly over to the edge of the hollow. "Where do you want to meet? Since I assume you want to be part of these

meetings," growled the she-cat.

Scorch pricked her ears, "It won't be good to meet on a steady schedule or at the same place. But there's a beech tree and stream just a little that way," Scorch pointed south with her tail. "We can meet there in five days. That should be enough time."

Moonpaw nodded and then walked stiffly off. Boulderpaw joined her at her shoulder and they watched Moonpaw's figure disappear into the forest. "Do you think we can trust her to help us?" Boulderpaw murmured.

"You were the one who recommended her," she reminded him, "And I don't know why we shouldn't. She seemed interested in defeating Pinefur."

"But can we trust her to make good decisions and not accidentally tell a traitor?" Boulderpaw's eyes were worried.

Scorch flicked her tail and stood up, "She's cynical enough to be discretionary. I think we'll be fine. A harder part will be getting to WindClan. It's a shame that Crowpelt didn't work with us, it would have been that much simpler. As it is now, we don't know a single cat with ties to WindClan."

Boulderpaw nodded, "That does pose a problem," he muttered.

Scorch nodded, "Its almost dusk, lets get back to camp and sleep on it." She turned toward the ShadowClan border and led Boulderpaw in silence through the wild forest area.

The snow was speckled with darker drip marks and Scorch could see the lengthening icicles hanging on pine branches. The seasons would change soon. She took a deep breath of the pine scented air as they entered into familiar territory and let it slowly in comforted relief. But she noticed Boulderpaw's nose twitching distastefully. He was clearly still a ThunderClan cat.

"Should we hunt on the way back?" Scorch asked him, her mind flicking to Flashpaw.

Boulderpaw shook his head then stopped suddenly. "Oh no, I was

hunting with Flashpaw earlier! What did she think when I just vanished on her?" His thoughts had evidently flown to Flashpaw too.

Scorch shrugged her shoulders, a twinge of annoyance flicked her tail. "She'll understand that we're doing much more important things. You can go hunting with her tomorrow to make up for it," Scorch felt as if she were being very generous- but it wasn't her time to spend anyways. *I don't own Boulderpaw.*

Disconcerted, she pulled ahead and followed the soft needle-strewn snow on the quickest route toward camp, Boulderpaw muttering excuses under his breath all the way. *He never worried about my feelings like this, bitterness rose in her throat. I thought that we were friends.*

Scorch quickened her pace as she saw the bramble camp through the trees and ducked down through the thorn entrance into the camp. Several cats were sharing prey as dusk settled behind the overcast sky and she noticed several cats she didn't know among them. *Cats like Sky?*

But her eyes lit up as she spied Mira, Jump, and Painted sharing a temptingly plump squirrel for so late in the cold season. Scorch headed over to them, it felt like forever since she'd spoken to them last. Mira beamed as she saw her approaching and Jump nodded friendly. Painted stared at her frostily and Scorch sighed. Painted was always difficult when it came to forgiving or being forgiven.

"Hello, how are you doing?" Scorch asked politely.

Mira purred, "Very well, but what about you? You've been holed up for so long and all of a sudden you're out and about again! How are you feeling?" Mira looked at her with wide amber eyes.

Scorch purred back and sat down, "I'm feeling much better. I'm nearly back to normal," she assured Mira.

Jump nodded, "That's good. And I suppose you've heard the news?" his chest puffed up with pride. Scorch noticed that Painted snorted.

She ignored the spotted she-cat and purred, "I did. Congratulations." Her eyes trailed to Mira's plump belly. She'd known before she'd even gotten captured by Nightwing a moon ago. Now those kits would be due any day now.

Scorch could assume this was part of the reason why they were still with the Clans. "Are you three planning on staying here for awhile with these kits?"

The three cats shared a perplexed look and Scorch could guess that they weren't decided on it yet. Mira looked at her, "Actually, we haven't figured that out yet. I would rather stay here since its close to you and we have more protection here. Sunstar has already graciously allowed us to stay as long as we need to."

Jump nodded, "I'd rather not be in the Clan in case we get caught up in something again, but we can't travel safely right now and it's still the cold season."

Painted scowled, "I'd leave, but I'm not foolish enough to go out on my own right now. So I'll stay here until Mira is ready to leave. Though I say we should go as soon as we can."

Scorch's ears twitched, the plans she had running through her head didn't leave much room for kits and even less room for them to leave. "Well, let me know when you're decided," she mewed, standing up.

"Scorch, you will come with us when we leave, right?" Mira looked at her with wide eyes. "ShadowClan and RiverClan are safe, surely your job is done here."

Scorch stood up and hesitated in her response. Her job wasn't done yet, but she would probably be done by the time the kits were old enough to travel. But did she want to leave? Her thoughts flashed to Sonya and Boulderpaw. Could she leave her two best friends. She shivered, or, at least, one best friend? Thinking of Sonya sent unsure shivers down her spine.

"I don't know," she murmured.

Painted was the first to jump up, "What do you mean you, 'don't know,'? Of course you know! The entire reason why we're here in the first place was to find your parents. You can't just abandon that now!" Painted's anger swept over her like a tide of boiling water and Scorch took a pace back to not be scalded by the fury.

"But I've also come so far with the Clans. How can I leave them?" Painted looked dumbfounded at her response and Scorch ducked away, hurrying away toward where Sunstar was sitting, she needed to let him know what she was doing. A pair of black legs blocked her.

She looked up, wondering if Time had returned. But those eyes weren't red, they were amber. And they were sympathetic. "Raven," she greeted the last littermate of the three rogues.

"Scorch, are you alright? I saw Painted getting flustered," Scorch blinked, Raven seemed much more at ease then before. Had one moon of rest really changed her that much?

"I'm fine, she's just not excited about some of my plans," Scorch muttered.

"Your plans to save ThunderClan and WindClan?" Raven guessed.

Scorch looked up, shocked. She was sure she had only really told Boulderpaw so far. "How did you know?" she warily asked.

Raven dipped her head, "I heard you talking to Sunstar this morning. You said Pinefur needed to be defeated, so that would mean saving ThunderClan and WindClan, correct?"

Scorch nodded, "I'm going to talk to Sunstar again right now," she mewed, nodding at the yellow leader who was talking to Willowwater. The she-cat looked completely healed and Scorch remembered that the RiverClan she-cat had been nearly nest-ridden the last time Scorch had seen her. *It was only a moon, but its almost a different world*. Things changed so fast.

"He's busy right now, but I wanted to ask you about something..." Raven steered her away from Sunstar toward the edge of the

clearing and glanced around before pulling her into a small, shadowed corner. Raven bent her head toward her ear, "I've been spying on Pinefur for the last three seasons," the she-cat hissed into her ear.

Scorch blinked up at the amber-eyed she-cat, her heart pounding; Was she serious? "What do you mean?" Raven's amber eyes had lost their unusual cheerfulness and were calm and focused.

"Nightwing had me keep an eye on Pinefur while I was part of NightClan. He wanted to know if Pinefur was planning an attack and to know their schedule for when he would to attack," Raven explained.

Scorch nodded slowly, but frowned. "Why didn't you mention this sooner?"

Raven shrugged, "It wasn't important while we were beating Nightwing. But if we're going to go at Pinefur, I think it could be quite useful," her amber eyes took on a strange gleam and Scorch wasn't sure if it was reassuring or scary.

"We should go talk to Sunstar, then," Scorch mewed, nodding at Raven and leading the black she-cat over to Sunstar and Willowwater.

Scorch pricked her ears as they neared, "I know that, but I would like you to consider this," Sunstar was mewing about something to Willowwater, trying to look supportive but Willowwater seemed unsure.

"Sunstar?" she mewed, bringing the yellow leader's attention toward her.

"Ah, yes, what is it, Scorch?" his orange eyes flicked over Raven before returning to her. "Is there another thing you would like to ask for today?"

Scorch twitched her tail. "I suppose you could say that this is just a continuation of our earlier conversation," she mewed, sitting down between Sunstar and Willowwater. Raven settled down across from

her and Scorch smiled.

"Scorch," Sunstar growled, "You do not get any say in who becomes the leading figures of the Clans."

Scorch flicked her tail ruefully, did he really think she cared about that? "Of course, I never thought any differently," she mewed calmly. "But I would like you talk to you about Pinefur."

Sunstar and Willowwater stiffened and flashed glances at each other. "Yes, we have to hope that ThunderClan and WindClan free themselves soon," Sunstar began cautiously.

Scorch shook her head, "We're going to have to help them. The odds are stacked even more steeply against them then they were for us against Nightwing," she mewed.

Sunstar straightened, "We do not have the strength to rescue them."

"We don't have to!" Scorch insisted, "They just need an extra push to help them get free. Even with our little strength we should be able to turn the power in their favor."

Willowwater was nodding slowly, her green eyes bright. But Sunstar shook his wide yellow head, "No, I will not lead these cats into another war to help cats that aren't even their own."

Scorch hissed, suddenly annoyed. "This is for them! For their future kits! For their own Clans! We cannot separate the two Clans until Pinefur is gone and all immediate threats are eliminated. Right now, helping others is the best way for them to help themselves."

"I agree," Raven added.

"So do I," Willowwater spoke up, giving Sunstar a decisive look.

Sunstar shifted his paws as he realized he was outnumbered on the subject. "Look, let's at least wait until new-leaf."

Scorch shook her head, "That'll be too long. Even if the thaw comes soon, it could still be moons until the seasons change."

Raven nodded and Sunstar hissed. "Fine, we'll wait until all the new leading cats are established and then we'll talk about it with the Clans. If the cats are willing, we will help them. But I will not force them into a war that could destroy us after we worked so hard!" Sunstar got up abruptly and headed off for his den, tail swishing angrily behind him.

"He's not excited about the idea," Scorch observed.

Willowwater snorted, "That's the least you could say. But he's always been that way; Always hated having to take care of any Clan but his own. But that's how Nightwing and Pinefur won in the first place," the gray tabby she-cat shook her head and stood up. "The night after tomorrow is the full moon and I'll be escorting Flickertail to the Moonpool. It shouldn't be too long until all the cats are chosen and you have your answer."

"Good," Scorch mewed, getting up. "I've already started getting the message to ThunderClan. I just need to work on WindClan now," she mewed, turning away.

Raven came after her, "I didn't even tell them about my spying," the black she-cat commented.

"Save it," Scorch shrugged, "It'll come out soon enough. But while we're on the subject, do you have any contacts in WindClan maybe?"

Raven shook her head and Scorch sighed. "It's a real shame that Crowpelt didn't align himself with us," she lamented. "It would have made the connection to WindClan so much easier. But now we have to go in blind."

Raven's eyes gleamed, "You weren't listening too closely. I may not have had any contact, but I did spy on them for three seasons. I know exactly who we could approach about this."

Scorch looked at her and purred, "You don't know how happy I am that you were a spy!" Excitement bubbled in her at the thought. If Raven really did know who was to trust, then their fears would easily be taken care of. She paused beside the apprentice den and

looked at Raven, "Tomorrow, just after dawn, would you come with me to WindClan territory? The sooner we let them know what's going on, the better."

Raven nodded, "I'll go hunting early and then we can leave. There are no assigned patrols or anything. Will you bring Boulderpaw?" the she-cat's amber eyed bored into her.

Scorch stared at her paws, "I would like to," she mumbled, she and Boulderpaw always did this sort of thing together. "But if you think its best to leave him, we can sneak out without him."

Raven nodded, "Two cats will be more discreet than three and we won't be recognized while he will be."

Scorch frowned, "But you said that you've met Pinefur before, haven't you?"

"The chance of meeting Pinefur himself is very low and we never met directly. All of Nightwing's cats were black-furred so I find it unlikely that I stood out. Plus that was nearly four seasons ago," Raven shook her head, "Boulderpaw is far more likely to be recognized."

Scorch shrugged, "Okay, as you like." They said goodnight and Raven stalked to the warriors den as the purple shadows of twilight formed on the snowy ground. Scorch yawned as she sat outside the apprentices den. Flashpaw passed her with a friendly nod as Scorch sat watching the sky in the cold air. Even though heavy pine branches blocked out most of the sky from the camp, a few tiny scraps were visible and she wanted to see a star. It had been so long since she'd seen one last.

"Not really the best place for stargazing," Scorch looked behind her at Boulderpaw. The light had quickly dimmed and she could only just make out the gray outline of his ears, but his blue eyes glowed. "Move a little over here..." he pulled her back and to the right a few steps and she blinked. All the little scraps of visible sky joined as one ring and she could see the moon- ghostly white and agreeably plump- hanging among its crown of stars.

Scorch sighed at the silver radiance. The cold was barely felt as she gazed upon those far-away dots of white fire. She lifted up her nose to touch the silver light and could almost feel its silky caress. She turned to Boulderpaw and purred. "Thank you," she mewed.

He frowned, "What for?"

"For everything," she wrapped her paws around his neck as she scrabbled onto his back. He huffed but she purred as she bathed herself in the starlight. *This is what I had forgotten I missed.*

...

Scorch pushed her way through a bunch of crackling fronds. They were brittle with frost and broke off into her fur when they snagged on her pelt. Grumbling, she pulled away and shook out her fur, feeling the twigs burrowing uncomfortably deeper.

"Are you okay?" Raven paused up ahead and looked back at her.

"She's fine," another cat grumbled, pushing past her irritably.

Scorch just nodded at Raven, ignoring the other cat. As much as she liked Painted, she didn't understand why Raven had brought her when she'd refused to allow Boulderpaw come along. *And he looked so hurt when I said 'no.'* She could picture his round blue eyes now, blank with shock when she said he couldn't come with her. As if she was telling a bad joke

She pushed the memory from her mind. It wouldn't traumatize him. Glancing up at the sky, she saw gray clouds were barely starting to pale into pink as sunrise drew closer. It would dawn on them soon enough, but right now, they were in the middle of what used to be RiverClan territory. It wasn't nearly as overgrown as the forest, but the dim light blended the scenery together and it was harder to see what would catch on her fur.

Hopping back in the trail Raven and Painted were following, she concentrated on where she put her paws and ignored what Raven and Painted were murmuring about ahead of her. "Why did we even need to bring Scorch?" Painted sounded scornful as she flicked her

ear back at her.

Scorch simmered a little under her fur. Painted hadn't acted like a friend at all on the entire trek, complaining all the way out of the pine forests and discouraging the entire journey throughout RiverClan territory. Scorch really wished it was just her and Raven.

"Scorch is quite good at judging character and influencing cat's decisions. *You* know that," Raven responded calmly, but she didn't sound happy with Painted's attitude either.

Though, Scorch paused to skirt around a fallen log that the two older cats leaped over. *They seem to be getting along well. I guess they talked- or yelled- things out already. That's good*. For a moment she was relieved that she'd not been herself when that went down and had been able to skip the sibling drama.

"The moor is just past here," Raven paused ahead and Scorch scrambled to her side. The ground sloped in front of her paws and a ditch with a frozen stream ran down to the lake. A marsh lay in the bowl of three slopes cupped into the march and ended at the lake. Just past the marshland an island jutted out above the frozen water, a long tree-trunk bridging the two lands together.

"Does any cat live there?" Scorch asked, pointing at the Island. To her, it looked like an ideal place for a camp.

Raven shrugged, "I've never seen any cat there." Painted shook her head too and started down toward the swamp.

Raven and Scorch followed and Scorch flicked her tail at a strange structure that was outlined with a shiny substance. It encircled enormous animals that she'd never seen- with glossy hides and breath that made mini clouds in the early morning cold.

"That's a Horseplace. Twolegs keep horses there. As long as you don't go in the boundaries, you're safe," Raven explained.

"Are they dangerous?" Scorch scanned the creatures warily.

"Not maliciously, but their hooves could crush a cat if they weren't careful," Scorch dropped her eyes to their feet of stone, ebony black

against the frosted grass.

Scorch nodded, "I'll just stay away then." She wrinkled her nose as they entered the marsh. The ground turned into frosty mud and the ice looked green and slimy. Fog hung over the bog and Scorch soon lost sight of Painted.

"Where did she go?" Scorch looked around.

"Use your nose," Raven suggested. Scorch took in a deep breath, but the air was cold and the scents seemed faint. "Concentrate harder. And open you mouth."

Scorch opened her mouth and aloud her tongue to taste the scents, just barely picking up Painted's scent ahead. "There she is," she nodded at a thin silhouette in the fog.

"Yep," Raven nodded. "Once we get on the moor it'll thin out."

Scorch looked up, the moor didn't have that much more elevation, but it did have lots of hills for the wind to channel the fog out of. To the right, the much higher hill blocked out the view of anything outside of Clan territory. "The Clans seem so sheltered here," she murmured quietly.

"Not sheltered enough," Raven mewed grimly. "Most loners grow up knowing to avoid the lake because of the Clans. But it takes just the incentive of prey and power to lure them here and disrupt order."

Scorch sighed as they passed the stale WindClan markers. "Wait here," Raven murmured, "Painted didn't wait for us."

As Raven bounded off into the fog that was gradually thinning, the sky gleamed brighter as the sun crested the horizon. The clouds were breaking apart as day broke and allowed light to flood the land. A gust of wind blew around her, whipping her tail and pulling her fur in the direction of the lake. She blinked at golden rays broke through the fog, turning the faint cloud gold all around her.

She blinked as she saw a black shadow beyond her sight of vision. But they were on the moor, weren't they? There was nothing here to cast a shadow. Scorch blinked again and the shadow stood right

in front of her, a pool of darkness in the midst of sunshine. *Time.*

"It's good to see you again," Time's mew grumbled in his throat.

Scorch caught her breath, heart beat skyrocketing and paws becoming slick with sweat. Why was she so nervous? "You-Your back," she calmed her stuttering and eyed him as calmly as she could manage.

Time dipped his head, the black shadows shrinking into his black pelt. "I never left."

Scorch's pelt prickled, "Why are you here?" She looked around, searching for Raven and Painted.

"Because you sought me."

"No I didn't!" Frustration flashed beneath her pelt; She was quite sure she had not been looking for him!

He dipped his head again, red eyes narrowing. "Yes, you did. Or I would not be here. Remember that your mind is not always in control of your heart."

Scorch paused, was that true? Had she been searching for something as she looked around the sun-dappled fog? Looking at Time, she realized it didn't matter how he was here- just why. "Why did I seek you?"

Time's eyes glittered, "Very smart. You seek me because you desire to know yourself. And because you desire to understand Sonya."

Scorch's ears pricked and she leaned forward. "Who is Sonya, really? What are her powers? What is her goal?" She wanted to know what her friend wanted. Did Sonya really want her powers? Or was there something else?

Before Time could respond a call cut across the moor from behind her. She turned, wind lashing her whiskers back into her face as she peered through the gale. Raven and Painted were bounding over to her, ears flattened as they raced low over the moor.

"What's going on?" Scorch asked as she saw they were breathless and wide-eyed.

"The dawn patrol is coming, but that means that there is no other cat out yet. It's the perfect time to get close to the camp," Raven mewed, quickly leading them through the waving grass.

Scorch barely thought to look for Time before they left and she was unsurprised that he had disappeared. *I was looking for him with my heart?*

She shook her head- what ridiculousness. She had just been admiring the pretty morning light and he'd shown up, taking advantage of her wondering thoughts. Scorch refocused on Raven's black tail snaking in front of her- she could ponder about Time later, right now they needed to contact WindClan.

"Where were you?" Scorch asked Painted.

"I was only just in front of you," the spotted she-cat grunted. "You two should have stayed with me."

Scorch flicked her tail in amusement- of course Painted would see it that way. "Sorry," she apologized, "For some reason I thought Raven was leading us, so I was following her."

Painted snorted, "We all know where WindClan territory is, not just her. Besides, all we need to do is find a WindClan cat and tell them that we're going to free them. Why did we need to drag you along?" Painted looked at her sharply. "No matter how smart cats may think you are, you're still a kit and you shouldn't be doing such a dangerous mission," Painted frowned.

Scorch flicked her tail and shrugged, "I don't have a problem with it."

"Kits often don't know the difference between what they should and shouldn't do," Painted retorted.

Scorch shrugged, "Perhaps that's true," she paused and looked at Painted. "But that's why I'm not going alone, isn't it?"

Painted glanced at her, "The best decision you've made this moon."

"Shh!" Raven turned back toward them and glared. "If you were paying attention, you would be aware that a hunting patrol is about to crest that hill!" Scorch jumped at Raven's harsh whisper and instantly ducked into a patch of tall heather. Raven and Painted both disappeared behind a gorse bush and they all waited as the cheerful chatter floated down to them and four cats topped the hill above them.

Scorch snorted to herself, they wouldn't catch anything with all that racket! She eyed the cats suspiciously. The first three cats were bright-eyed and loopy-mouthed, romping and playing as they charged down the hill and kicking their way through the heather- dangerously close to where she huddled close to the ground.

The last cat came more slowly, the tom was short and compact with dark brown tabby fur stretched tight over his frame that looked light and strong at once. His blue eyes were ice cold and a frown marred his face. He was not a young cat and he did not looked pleased as he watched the younger cats ahead of him. But he did nothing as they caught and released a rabbit- playing with the poor creature as they cornered it between the three of them.

Scorch stiffened as he paused merely two tail-lengths from her and narrowed his eyes suspiciously, drawing in deep breaths. She feared to shrink back further in case it drew his attention, but she knew she was too close to have her scent masked by the dead heather even if her pelt wasn't seen.

She felt her pelt burn as his eyes flicked over to her. Scorch knew she'd been spotted and she stared back imploringly. If they got caught now, Pinefur would be suspicious and everything could be ruined. He might even investigate Nightwing and discover that the cruel black tom was no longer in power. *That would be disastrous!*

The tom opened his mouth but the thundering paw-steps of his Clan-mates paused him as they raced back with the rabbit. They dropped it at his paws, "There, get carrying! And hurry up, we need to catch way more than this or Spark will be angry," a tom with off-white fur mewed.

"Yeah, if you watch carefully, you might learn something," gloated a spiky-furred she-cat.

"Come on, we're wasting time," ordered the oldest of the three other cats; his tone was less antagonizing but his brown eyes were just as lofty as the dark tabby tom pulled the rabbit over his shoulders. His mouth was a hard, firm line and Scorch guessed what was going on as the cats continued onward, their voices fading into echoes.

"I can't believe he let them talk to him like that! He was obviously twice as old as all of them!" Painted growled as they came out of their hiding places.

"No, the other dark brown tom was probably close to his age," Raven corrected her sister.

"They were Pinefur's cats. I bet the tom was a Clan cat- he couldn't do anything but what they told him," Scorch explained.

Painted snorted, "I wouldn't care about that. I'd scratch their ears anyways, those arrogant fur-balls."

"Stay calm, we don't know what leverage Pinefur holds over the Clan cats. That is one of the things we need to know," Raven mewed.

Scorch looked at her, confused. "Don't you know?"

Raven shook her head, "Besides being outnumbered by almost two-to-one, I don't really know what other things Pinefur could have threatened them with."

Scorch's thoughts flew to Leafpaw; Killed for the disobedience of some other cat. "He threatens their friends and families," she murmured.

Raven's and Painted's eyes both hardened, "Its a cheap tactic," Painted growled.

But Scorch was looking after the cats thoughtfully, "Yes, but I also think we just found the right cat to help us."

Chapter 43: Clashing

Hey guys, this is the other admin, Flame. I'm sorry nothing has been happening forever. The other admin said she didn't feel up to it and didn't want me doing it without me but I couldn't make you guys wait anymore so I'm back. Hope that's okay with everyone! -Flame

Chapter 43: Clashing

"His name is Flightfrost," Raven mewed, her words nearly torn away by the wind as they raced over the moor. Painted followed behind Scorch as the red and black she-cat pounded half a tail-length behind Raven over the moor.

"He's the oldest remaining Clan cat from the original WindClan," Raven continued, dashing around a curve and pushing through a thick patch of heather. The black she-cat slowed down and Scorch strayed to her side.

"Has he been part of any revolution before?" Scorch thought of the thick muscled tabby that had taken the sneering of Pinefur's cats with a cold demeanor. 'Frost' definitely fit right with him.

Raven shook her head, "I didn't have that much inside information and WindClan only tried once to free themselves. ThunderClan is much more engaging in that sort of thing. He neither led it nor was he against it."

"That might mean he's not interested in starting a revolution and won't help us," Painted growled.

Scorch shook her head in dissent. "It also may mean he didn't want to be part of something sure to fail. If he's an older cat he will have more influence on the other cats and will be able to let the cats know safely and efficiently; Raven, which WindClan cats are spies for Pinefur?"

The black she-cat paused and hesitated. "I only saw one cat actually give themselves away."

"Well, who was it?" Painted demanded.

"It was a young tom named Bouncepelt- he's got an orange and white pelt with bright amber eyes. Acts friendly and unsuspecting but I think Pinefur's promise of deputyship was too much for him to resist." Raven shook her head in disappointment and Painted rolled her eyes.

"Well, we can avoid him and tell other cats to avoid him. Any other cats?" Painted asked.

Raven nodded, "An apprentice named Deerpaw. The only apprentice in WindClan, unless she became a warrior. But I only suspect her, I never actually saw her betray any cat."

Scorch frowned, "Then we'll have to avoid her until we can confirm or deny her position with Pinefur." Scorch nodded in front of them. The hunting patrol they had been tailing was running around on the hill that stood across from them. Flightfrost stood there, more pieces of prey slung over his shoulders.

"How will we get his attention without attracting the others?" Painted whispered.

"We wait for them to move on ahead. Flightfrost is tailing them and he obviously isn't that hurried about it," Raven answered.

"But what if he alerts them to us?" Painted shifted her paws, looking less irritated and more worried.

"I don't think he will. He saw me, but didn't say anything to them. I think he hates them so much that he wouldn't want to help them at all if he could help it," Scorch mewed. "But I think that I should approach him first before he sees you two."

"No!"

"Out of the question."

Raven and Painted growled in unison as they turned on her. "Why not?" Scorch looked up at them.

"If he does attack you, you can't win," Painted growled.

"I don't think he will. And I am a kit- or at least, I look like one- if he is a warrior, he will not attack me. Besides, one small cat is much less imposing than three cats," Scorch mewed.

Raven looked unsure but Painted still was annoyed with the suggestion. "Why do you always think you have to do the dangerous things? I can go alone, or Raven can, and it won't be overwhelming for him!"

"I think that would be best," Raven added.

"But he's already seen me- he knows I'm here. It won't be as surprising when I show up," Scorch defended herself.

"He's going to have to face the reality that all three of us are here in not too long anyways. I think it would be wiser if I went, since I know the trails," Raven mewed, amber eyes gleaming.

Scorch huffed but didn't argue as Raven slipped around the hills, approaching Flightfrost at an angle that would hide her for most of the way but wouldn't reveal herself right on top of the WindClan tom.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Painted mewed quietly, her eyes following the faint shadow of her sister's pelt.

Scorch side-glanced at her and looked at her paws. "I'm never sure. But I wouldn't do it unless I think it is a good plan."

Painted sighed, "Why did you need to get involved in the Clans? I never wanted to see another Clan cat in my life and now I'm living with them- helping them even!"

"Is it that bad?" Scorch looked at her friend worriedly. She'd hardly stopped to think how it might have made her friends feel. She had only thought about how stubborn or difficult they were being.

Painted didn't look at her. "It was hard at first, and it still is. I was a loner for my whole life and just adjusting to working with others is an ongoing process. But these cats aren't bad, they just want things to go back to how they were before," Painted's eyes darkened. "I can't begrudge them for something I wish for so much."

Scorch looked at her paws. "Do you really wish things had never changed?" *Is she not happy at all with the things that have happened since so long ago?*

"I do."

They remained in silence for a few moments until the rustling of grass alerted them to Raven's return. And she wasn't alone. "Well, it wasn't easy," Raven puffed, pushing her way through the heather. "But I convinced him to hear us out."

Behind her followed Flightfrost, his eyes narrowed and his paw-steps silent. "You wanted to give me some news about the Clans?" he inquired coldly.

"Yes," Painted stepped forward before Scorch could move. "We are here to tell you that a plan is in motion to overthrow Pinefur."

Flightfrost's reaction was subtle, his eyes barely widening and his tail just slightly twitching. But Scorch could almost taste the excitement that rolled off the stolid cat. "You're not Clan cats, why should I believe you? Do you have any proof?"

Scorch stepped forward but Painted pushed her back. "We have helped defeat Nightwing and now RiverClan and ShadowClan are ready to defeat Pinefur."

Raven and Scorch exchanged a panicked gaze. The Clans had not actually agreed to help yet. In fact, most of them were unaware of what they were doing. Lying was never a good idea if you wanted to work with a cat. Scorch pushed forward again, "But we cannot defeat Pinefur alone. We will need all the help from WindClan and ThunderClan that we can gather to drive him and his cats away," she mewed, looking steadily up at the senior tom.

Flightfrost looked down at her, recognition sparked in his ice eyes but nothing else- no surprise and no haughtiness. Scorch found that she liked the simpleness his emotions expressed.

"That's still not enough. You can say that, but until the leader of those Clans- or at least a deputy- comes and pledges their support, I will not endorse such a plan of action. And that includes a cat from ThunderClan," his gaze flashed from one to the other.

Scorch bit her lip, there were no deputies in RiverClan and ShadowClan. And even though that would not be true by evening tomorrow, ThunderClan would not have a deputy for a long time. "For ThunderClan, how about just a representative? Because they are still governed by Pinefur I do not want them to be dividing power amongst themselves. It will arouse suspicion."

Painted frowned at her, "They could do it without Pinefur knowing."

Raven shook her head, "No, because a new leader would be treated differently than before. And change is suspicious."

Scorch nodded and turned back to the WindClan tom. "I would like to ask you that you let all your fellow Clan-mates know of this plan so they can start preparing and on the next half-moon I will bring the cats you wanted for you to see and we can settle the date for the attack. Does that sound okay?" she mewed solemnly.

Flightfrost shifted his paws, "They won't all listen. And I'm still not sure of this. Just the mention of a revolt can get you killed. And I swore I would not be responsible for the death of a Clan-mate through my own foolishness."

Scorch stepped forward, "But is slowly being killed any better? If you can throw off Pinefur there will be no more of this fear and demeaning behavior the Clans are subjected to. They will be able to grow once again."

Flightfrost looked at the sky with longing for a moment and finally gave a sigh. "I will spread the word. And I will be as careful as possible. I hope it won't come to it, but if Pinefur discovers this know that I will take the full blame. You are not to try to save me at

the expense of any other cat."

Scorch looked up at the tom with reverent respect. His fur was limp and dull and his shoulders- as strong as they were- seemed narrow and bony. This was an old cat whose spirit was his whole strength. "I do not think it will come to that, but I will swear on my life I will not cause death to any cat on your behalf." It was a promise Scorch was sure would be nearly impossible to break, but most things that are broken were once so strong. It is the fragile and the weak that flutter just above the drop.

Flightfrost nodded his head and turned away, "They will notice my absence soon. I bid you good-day and I pray to StarClan that you keep your word."

"Wait!" Scorch followed him. "There are two cats which should not be told of the rebellion," she mewed.

"Why not?" he turned on her with narrowed eyes.

Scorch lowered her head, "We are suspicious of their loyalty. I think caution would be best used here. They are Bouncepelt and Deerpaw."

Flightfrosts's eyes hardened, "I will not tolerate such an implication that my Clan-mates are traitors." Scorch's heart dropped, would this be over before it started? "However, I do not think a kit would say that without some reason whether unfounded or not and since lives will be at stake, I will not risk it. Thank you." He nodded and started off again. Scorch watched him push his way through the fronds of heather and disappear among the waving grass as sunlight streamed over the moor.

"Well, that went fairly well," Raven mewed as she returned to where they sat surrounded by the purple-gray heather.

"I guess. He seemed fairly reasonable," Painted grumbled, her paws tucked under her as she crouched.

"Yes, now all we have to do is return home and let them work. Flickertail will visit the Moonpool tonight and tomorrow the new

leader and deputies will be chosen." Scorch looked forward to having a chance to relax. Since she'd returned to the real world all she had done was work for the Clans. *Maybe I can go hunting with Boulderpaw and Flashpaw.*

Scorch kept her thoughts firmly in check as they quietly crept through trails of heather and grass that grew as tall as her even when they were dead. The wind blew wildly in her ears and she focused on Raven and Painted's pawsteps. She did not want to risk Time showing up. *When I see him next, I want it to be by my choice.*

.....

"What are you doing?" Scorch peeked open an eye. Boulderpaw stood over her with Flashpaw just behind him, the light behind them casting their faces in shadow.

"Concentrating," she muttered. She was lying on her back in the snow in a weak pool of sunlight.

"We're out here to go hunting. You should help too," Boulderpaw snapped.

"I already caught some."

"Two tiny mice won't feed the Clan!" the gray apprentice flashed back angrily.

"I'll hunt again later. Now leave me be," Scorch waved her tail at them and closed her eyes. "I'm concentrating."

"On what?" Flashpaw's curious mew rang in her ears.

"Stuff."

Boulderpaw snorted, "Come on, Flashpaw. Lets go hunt. *Somecat* has to do their duty." Scorch listened to their steps fade into the somber sound of the pines rustling in the wind. It was the day after the trip to WindClan territory. Flickertail had recently returned back from the Moonpool and he'd been talking with Sunstar and the senior warriors since. All the apprentices had been sent out of camp. And that included her.

They refuse the call me an apprentice when it's inconvenient for them and they refuse to call me a kit when it's inconvenient for me. With a snort Scorch returned to her concentrating. She wasn't sure what she was concentrating on, but she was trying to find Time within her powers of Mirages so that she could see him when she wanted to. So far she had been without much luck.

She drifted in and out of the mirage state- the sound buzzing and the colors dimming and brightening behind her eyelids. *Where is he?* Fear clawed her, did he not like her trying to summon him?

"That is not the most effective way to call me. But it will do," a voice grumbled.

Heart leaping to her mouth, Scorch sat bolt upright and opened her eyes. Time stood beneath a distant pine tree, his black pelt blending unobtrusively with the shadows as his red eyes fixed on her. Scorch padded closer to him, faltering only slightly in her strides when he narrowed his eyes at her and frowned.

"I wanted to ask you something," Scorch mewed.

"I will tell you all you want to know," Time invited, waving his thick black tail behind him.

"What are my powers, exactly? And how are they connected to you and Sonya."

Time's eyes sparkled, "Your 'powers' are just a side effect of the curse I gave you- one I gave to lift my own burden."

"How is it a curse?" Scorch's fur prickled uneasily along her spine.

"Time is a curse," he growled. "Sonya understands the curse and she is envious that you do not. However, you will learn its darkness soon."

Scorch flattened her ears. "Time is a blessing! Time with friends, time with family..."

"Time spent in horror?" the black tom questioned.

"That is just a part of life. Good and bad time. They offset each so at the very least 'time' is neutral," Scorch argued.

His red eyes glimmered. "Then you wouldn't mind having my responsibility?"

Scorch took a step back, "And what would that be?" she warily asked.

"Infinite time." She looked at him, confused. "I have neither an end nor a beginning. I am simply existing beyond the outskirts of life as I guard time itself," he growled, tail lashing behind him. "Your powers and Sonya's are a relief of my curse. You hold the time of past and she holds the time of the future so that I can live in the present for at least a short while."

Scorch's mind whirled, that was why she could see mirages of cats in the past? "Sonya sees the future?" Scorch mewed cautiously.

Time nodded, "However, both your powers are incomplete compared to mine. You do not actually see all that has happened, only what has happened in the immediate area around you in the past or future. And you only see as far as your bloodline goes."

"So I can only see as far back as my ancestors lived? But wouldn't that be the beginning?" Scorch was growing more and more confused.

Time nodded, "For you, it is not much of a relief since you only exist today because you had ancestors in the past. However... for Sonya, her blood-line can diminish quickly," his eyes glimmered. "And that is where her curse lays."

Scorch shivered, her fur was slowly bushing up. "Then how am I cursed?"

Time's eyes gleamed over her, as if eying a juicy piece of prey. But the look died into despondence. "I do not usually enjoy the suffering of others. But it is a relief, however small, to lift as least some of my burden onto another cat," he sighed. "You have the knowledge of the past, of the ages. The past is set in stone, nothing can change it

now. Some would say that is the curse- not being able to lift any grief that has been endured and death that has been done. But your curse lays elsewhere since you steadfastly refuse to be crushed and deny to see what it is that will crush you."

Scorch trembled, "What is it?!" she insisted.

Time gave her a small glance. "Sonya already told you; you hold the greater power." He seemed to dissolve into the shadow, a glimpse of his red eyes flashing toward her before disappearing.

Scorch was left, trembling. What she had been told was not something she could make sense of. A curse was only a curse depending on how a cat looked at it. Time even admitted that she was stronger than it. So what else was there to crush her? *I hold the greater power. Sonya told me so. Time did too. But if it's a curse, why would Sonya even want it?*

Turning, she started running. It was a few moments of silence before she realized where she was running to. She was running to find Sonya. Her friend was nearby- around the RiverClan border, she could sense it. The white snow blurred with the dark brown of the pine trees to merge with the dark green over head speckled with the rays of faint white sunlight.

She had to know right now what was going on! Was it possible that Time was confirming what Song had told her? Did Sonya want her dead for her powers? Or was something else working here? *I feel like every cat knows something that I don't.*

Sprinting across the ShadowClan border, her paws skidded on the slippery snow as she spotted her target. Sonya sat at the end of the half-bridge, looking out over the frozen lake. Turning, she raced over to her friend, her paws thumping on the wood as it creaked and wobbled unsteadily beneath her.

Sonya didn't turn around as she halted a tail-length behind her, catching her breath with violent gasps. "You-know-Time?" Scorch sputtered out the words as she sat down and threw her head back to give herself more air.

Sonya's ear twitched and her fur rippled but she still didn't face her. "Yes."

"Did he teach you about your powers?" Scorch stared hard at the back of Sonya's head. She gave nothing away.

"He did."

"Did he tell you that if one of us dies, the other gets all of the powers?" Scorch's mew hardened. She needed a reaction here.

But Sonya didn't move. "It was one of the first things he told me."

Scorch looked at her, perplexed. "Did you try to kill me?" the words tumbled out of her mouth in a surge of frustration.

Sonya started, stiffening as she turned to Scorch with wide bright green eyes. "Do you think I did?" Her tone was hurt, but her eyes were steady.

Scorch paused, did she really believe Sonya had tried to have her killed? Sonya had been the one to lead her to where Crowpelt was and- if Sonya really could see the future- she would have known he would be there. And it was Sonya who had told her to climb the trees to escape even though she should have known they would break. Sonya also would have known that Amelia would be there to put her in sunlight when she returned to her body. It seemed like Sonya almost had to have been trying to get her killed.

Yet somehow, Scorch still couldn't convince herself. Was she just lying to herself? Probably. But Sonya was the cat she trusted more than anyone else. More than Painted, more than Mira, more than even Boulderpaw. Because it was Sonya that had helped her without any questions. Even if it had been done with malicious purposes.

"No, I don't." Scorch put her trust in Sonya once more, staring into her friend's clear eyes.

Sonya purred and her eyes softened. "Thank you. But I think that I do owe you an apology," the she-cat stood up and faced her nose-to-nose. Sonya's eyes held hers as she looked down at her and Scorch

tipped her head up.

Sonya ducked her head down in a flash, her muzzle pressed against Scorch's throat and her teeth grazing the freshly healed flesh. Scorch stayed still, her red and black fur quivering in tense fear. Was Sonya going to rip out her throat? Has she been wrong? But she didn't move or try to protect herself. She had said that she trusted Sonya, and she would die to prove how far.

"You're trembling," Sonya's voice rasped in a very un-Sonya-like way. "You said you trusted me."

"I do trust you," Scorch mewed in a whisper. "That's why I'm standing still."

Sonya pressed harder against her throat and then Scorch's chest rumbled as the white and ginger she-cat purred. "Thank you, Scorch." The she-cat pressed her head against Scorch's chest and sat down, purring and sobbing.

Scorch looked down at the she-cat huddled at her paws. Compassion flowed through her as she realized Sonya had just been testing her. Scorch rested her chin on her friend's head and sat down, wrapping her forelegs around Sonya's shaking shoulders and pulling her into her soft fur.

Gradually, Sonya's silent sobs ebbed and her tears no longer fell. "Thank you, Scorch," Sonya sniffed, leaning back and rubbing her watery eyes with her paw.

"No need to thank me, I'm your friend," Scorch looked at Sonya sympathetically. They were two souls- lost in power beyond the comprehension of any other cat. They were the only two that could understand each other. *Sonya knows of her curse*. Time's words echoed in her mind. Was it a heavy burden to carry? Scorch looked at Sonya's tear-streaked fur and knew that it was. *I hope I never know of my curse,* as selfish as that seemed she saw no reason why she should have to know.

"Now I have to apologize for everything that happened to you with Crowpelt and Nightwing. That was my fault," Sonya hung her head

dejectedly.

Scorch held her breath, "Did you know Nightwing was going to try to kill me?" she could hardly force the words past her lips.

Sonya looked up at her with wide, wet eyes and shook her head vigorously. "No! Nothing like that. I swear, I didn't know. I only knew that Crowpelt was going to be where he was and attack us."

Scorch felt disappointed, Sonya had deliberately gotten her captured? "Then how didn't you know that Nightwing was going to try to kill me?"

Sonya looked at her for a long moment. "Did Time tell you?"

Scorch's ears pricked, "Tell me what?"

Sonya gave a shy smile. "We can't use our powers on each other. You can't see my past and you can't sense my emotions, right?" She waited for Scorch to nod before continuing. "Well, I can't see your future or your emotions either. So I couldn't have known what was going to happen to you."

"But why have me get caught by Crowpelt?" Scorch still frowned.

"I didn't know for sure if he was going to capture you. And I thought that if you were put into their camp that you could get inside information and then I could helped you escape. But then... it all went wrong. I'm so sorry," Sonya looked at her with wide eyes, begging for forgiveness.

"But what about Amelia? Didn't you know she was going to be there?" Scorch has to free her conscience of everything.

Sonya dropped her head again, "I never looked into the future for that. I don't automatically know everything in the future, I have to look for it and I was sure that outside of Clan territory there wouldn't be any problems. Once we found your body. But I was wrong again." Sonya's shoulders shook. "I've made so many mistakes and you got hurt every single time," she sounded on the brink of crying again.

Scorch waved her tail, "But I'm alright," she mewed. Relief washed over her pelt like a warm breeze in the midst of the cold season. "I'm just glad that you're my friend." With a purr, she sat on the edge of the half-bridge so that her paws half hung over the lake.

Sonya sniffed and sat down next to her- their gazes scanning the distant horizons but with such a different look. Scorch's dark gaze was soft with gleeful relief. Sonya's bright gaze was sober and serious. "Are you sure you forgive me?" Sonya sounded unsure.

"Of course!" Scorch purred, flicking her tail over her friend's ear. "I made it out alright and you didn't mean for me to get hurt. I can forgive and forget," Scorch grinned at her. "But I would like you to tell me about something," she dropped her voice. "Time told me about your curse."

Sonya's gaze flashed with panic and she stood up looking flustered. "It's okay. I'm not going to cry over it. No cat will notice anyways..."

Scorch frowned, "What are you talking about? He only told me that you were aware of it. What is it?"

Sonya gave a weak laugh and relaxed. "Oh, never-mind. I was just overreacting."

Scorch looked her over. Sonya was brushing it off as if it didn't matter; How much could it hurt to look into the future? "What is your curse?"

Sonya looked away, "Well, you know. I can only see as far into the future as my legacy will go?"

"Oh," Scorch mewed, understanding. "Does it not last very long?"

Sonya sighed and shook her head, "But it's long enough." The she-cat mewed stubbornly.

"Is it only a few generations?" Scorch wondered aloud, if Sonya had kits and they had kits it seemed like her lineage would never die. But if she only ended up having one or two and only one of them or neither of them had kits of their own, it would die out quickly.

Sonya lad her tail over her shoulders. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad we can talk with no secrets between us. So has Time started training you to use your powers?" the she-cat asked.

Scorch pricked her ears, "No, but he did mention something about training. What did he teach you?"

They talked for a long while until the clouds rolled away and a fiery sunset turned the lake to red and stretched their shadows long behind them. Finally, with a sigh, Scorch stood up. "I better be getting back to camp," she mewed unhappily. She'd much rather continue talking with Sonya. She felt like she knew her friend better than every before and there was a fresh air of ease that flowed between them. The ease that came from trust.

"I understand," Sonya purred.

"When will I see you again?" Scorch looked at her friend worriedly.

"I won't be going anywhere," Sonya assured her. "I'm sure we'll see each other again before long. Goodbye!"

Scorch waved her tail as she started out into the forest. Refreshed in mind and body she raced through the long pines and skidded over the snow until she reached where she had spoken with Time. Sniffing around, she couldn't find the mice she had caught and guessed that Boulderpaw and Flashpaw had taken them back to camp.

I better catch something so that I don't go back empty-pawed. But the prey seemed to already be in their nests and the sun continued to set, its auburn light fading into gray. With a sigh, she headed back to camp and hoped no cat would accuse her of shirking. *I did catch two mice,* she told herself defensively. But guilt still stabbed her as she remembered chatting off the afternoon with Sonya.

Entering down into camp, she saw that is was so buzzing and busy that no cat noticed her as she slipped through the thorn barrier and padded over to Boulderpaw and Flashpaw that sat outside the apprentices den. "What's going on?" she asked. The atmosphere crackled like lightning.

The two apprentices didn't take their eyes off the leader's den. "Sunstar and Flickertail are about to announce the new leader and deputies," Flashpaw explained. Scorch sat down next to them, eying the untouched fresh-kill pile hungrily. Everyone else seemed too excited to eat but her belly was rumbling.

"How long until he announces it?" Scorch asked, wondering if she had time to snatch a mouse.

"Any moment now. He's been talking with the other cats for a while and Flickertail just left a little while ago," Flashpaw mewed excitedly. The tall slim she-cat was shivering in excitement.

As she spoke, the great yellow leader exited his den with a trail of cats following on his tail. His wide yellow shoulders tensed as he leaped on top of his den and faced the cats with a regal tilt of his head. Every cat watched him with abated breath as he surveyed them and nodded slowly to the cats below.

"RiverClan, ShadowClan. We have defeated our enemy Nightwing and freed our Clans. The time has come for us to reaffirm our strength by returning to the ways of old that we have fought for so long to keep," He lifted his head to look through the pine branches to the sky above where the first stars were appearing in the purple-pink sky.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of RiverClan is Willowwater." Cheers erupted around the clearing as the silver tabby looked up at her leader and nodded with solemn green eyes. To Scorch, she didn't look happy, but she didn't refuse the congratulations of the cats.

Flashpaw got up and went over to the new deputy, purring. But Scorch remained with Boulderpaw. "I knew he was going to appoint her," she commented.

Boulderpaw shrugged, "She's a good warrior and isn't afraid to speak her mind."

"More than that," grumbled a voice behind them. They glanced over

to look at Flickertail. "She was Rainstone's best friend and those two were the ones who worked the hardest to save the Clans within RiverClan. Had Willowwater been listened to before, this could all have been avoided. Most cats have forgotten that but it is Sunstar's way of honoring her." The medicine-cat padded past them over to his new deputy.

When every cat had made known their best wishes to the new deputy, Sunstar called the cats back to attention. "ShadowClan, you are without a leader, a deputy, or a medicine-cat. I have no authority to appoint any position but StarClan has visited our medicine-cat and made known their wishes," Sunstar's eyes swept gravely over the tense ShadowClan cats.

"StarClan has commanded through me that Crowclaw will be the next leader of ShadowClan!" Yowls of approval echoed through the Clans and Scorch nodded her head in approval. Crowclaw was experienced but not old. Kind but not foolish. Strong but compassionate. He would make an excellent leader for guiding his Clan back to strength and glory through peace.

Crowclaw himself looked blank with shock but pleasure filled his purr as his friends weaved around him encouragingly. It was clear they would strongly support him. The black tom stood up and padded up to the den, swarming up the tree that stood beside it until he was level with Sunstar.

"Thank you, my friends. I promise I will forever strive to protect and make this Clan strong. Now, if I may, I would like to name my deputy." Sunstar nodded courteously to the new leader and jumped to the ground.

The black tom took a deep breath as thought clouded his amber eyes for a moment. Then his eyes cleared and he looked down on the cats with a pleased expression. "I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of ShadowClan will be Thistlebranch."

Cats engaged once more in yowls and cheers of approval as the white, tawny, and ginger tortoiseshell she-cat was instantly

surrounded by her Clan-mates. Flashpaw had returned to their side and called out her support. Scorch knew that this had been a wise decision as well. Thistlebranch was a well organized she-cat and although was likely to think with her heart before her head, had always worked tirelessly for her Clan-mates. She was clearly already endeared to her Clan-mates.

Strong cats for a weak Clan. I wish them the best. Scorch's thoughts drifted as she thought of ThunderClan and WindClan. She looked earnestly forward into the future for when those Clans would be free and her work would be done. But a tiny worm of discomfort wriggled in her belly. When she was all done with the Clans and they had no need for her, where would she go?

She shook off her doubt and instead joined in with the cheers of her present Clan-mates as they celebrated the new strength that they had acquired after moons of sacrifice. The joyful spirits of the cats clashed together against a backdrop of pine trees as they lost their worries in jubilation.

Chapter 44: Together

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Heavy gray clouds hung in the sky and cast dull, scattered light over the snow-laden forest. Scorch and Boulderpaw sat amid the snow and gray at the base of the beach tree where they would soon meet with the ThunderClan cats. The spring that had once bubbled up from the forest floor and run in a tiny stream was now dried up and its shallow ditch lay like an embossed snake along the forest floor.

"They should be here," Boulderpaw growled, pausing his pacing to taste the air.

Scorch watched him through eyes narrowed in rest. "They'll be here soon," she mewed. The day had arrived for when they would meet Moonpaw again and all the cats that the Thunderclan apprentice had been able to gather together.

The air was free from danger and Scorch was optimistic at heart about the coming meeting. Boulderpaw, she could sense, was less confident. He had trodden a path through the snow and his fur was prickled up along his spine as his gaze flashed hesitatingly from one side to the other.

"Why don't you sit down?" Scorch suggested. "You don't want to be ragged looking when you meet your Clan-mates again."

Boulderpaw just shook his head and kept on pacing more hastily. Scorch shrugged and settled down again. In the days following the new leadership of the Clans things had gone smoothly in the pine forest camp. That is, until Scorch had asked for an answer about them helping ThunderClan and WindClan.

A long and fierce debate had ensued between the new leaders- an argument in which Scorch had been excluded from. But through Willowwater's willing cooperation- for which Scorch was most

grateful- she had been able to make most of her points known. Mainly, that none of the Clans would be safe until Pinefur was gone.

The decision had been that ShadowClan and RiverClan would help. But it would be left up to the individual cats if they wanted to fight or not. No cat would be forced into the fight and that had been Sunstar's final compromise.

Scorch shifted her paws in the snow uneasily. The rogues that Sunstar had brought into the Clans had seemed willing, and so had Raven and Hawk from NightClan. But most of the Clan cats had seemed unsure. *I just have to hope when the time comes that they join in*. They had also agreed to send the two new deputies to meet with Flightfrost and a ThunderClan cat on the half-moon. And since the moon was only waxing into a full moon at this time, they'd have time before the half-moon to organize the ThunderClan cats.

"Do you think Moonpaw will really come?" Boulderpaw sounded worried.

"She's your sister," Scorch pointed out. "But, yes, I think we can trust her to come."

Boulderpaw paused and looked at her with wide blue eyes. "What if she brings Pinefur and she tells him everything?" his voice was thin with horror.

Scorch rolled her eyes. "I've only met Moonpaw a few times and I know that if there's one cat she *wouldn't* betray us to, it's Pinefur."

"But what if she told one of Pinefur's spies? And then Pinefur had Moonpaw..." Boulderpaw trailed off. And Scorch gave him a scathing glance.

"If you could quit worrying and pay attention you would be able to smell Moonpaw's scent. And the lack of Pinefur's scent," Scorch mewed, getting to her paws and turning to look in the direction of ThunderClan territory.

Through the screen of brown trunks and branches she could

perceive the movement of pelts slipping silently through the forest like fish through a stream. Five cats come to a halt in front of them and Scorch greeted them with a polite nod of her head.

They didn't respond and Boulderpaw moved to her side as an intense staring contest ensued. Scorch- who was probably the only one there not interested in competing- took the opportunity to scan the present cats. Moonpaw, of course, was there in the middle. But Scorch didn't recognize any of the other cats and didn't see Skypool. However, a skinny tortoiseshell she-cat caught her attention since she carried a common scent with Moonpaw and Boulderpaw.

Upon closer inspection, Scorch saw that one of the tortoiseshell's blue eyes was cloudy and knew this was Applefang- Boulderpaw's mother whom Pinefur had punished. The other cats were a mystery to her but they were all warriors, no cat was small enough to be an apprentice aside from Moonpaw.

Scorch stepped forward to meet them and their gazes flicked toward her. "Thank you for coming. My name is Scorch and for now I will be your mouth between RiverClan and ShadowClan. I suppose Moonpaw already told you why you came here?"

They all nodded and Moonpaw stepped forward. "I told them everything," she growled. "Now what is there left to do?"

Scorch's ear twitched at Moonpaw's discouraging tone. "On the next half-moon cats from WindClan, RiverClan, and ShadowClan will gather to discuss how and when to defeat Pinefur. A cat from ThunderClan is required to go."

"And what if we don't?" The argumentative mew came from a light gray tom with slitted blue eyes.

"Then ThunderClan will not be the Clan we fight to save," Scorch mewed harshly. She didn't like to beat cats who were already down, but they needed to understand that the other three Clans wouldn't fight for them if they didn't fight for themselves.

A murmur rose from the ThunderClan cats. The oldest of them, a ginger tom with green eyes, stepped forward and faced her. "Do we

need to send only one cat to this meeting?" Scorch nodded in response. "Where will the meeting take place?"

Scorch hesitated, wary of trusting such information to a stranger. Of course the location had already been settled, but who could they trust? "I will tell that to the representative," she mewed, decidedly.

"Why not tell them now?" Scorch turned at the new voice. The ThunderClan cats' fur bushed up and Boulderpaw jumped beside her. Raven stalked over from the distance and hopped over the small ditch until she stood beside Scorch. "Don't worry, I am a friend," Raven assured the cats. They laid their fur flat but kept a wary distance away.

Ducking down her head, Raven hissed in her ear, "They're all okay. None of them are traitors." Scorch sighed in relief. Raven had accompanied them from the start for the very reason to identify spies but had left to go hunting when they had arrived at the beach and no ThunderClan cats had been there.

"The meeting will be held on the Island. I hear it is a place where the Clans would hold gatherings every full moon. Willowwater thought that it would be the most appropriate place," Raven mewed.

"You're not a Clan cat?" the ginger tom asked.

Raven shrugged, "I've lived with the Clans for a while now. But I don't think I've officially been accepted into a Clan yet. I'll ask Crowstar when he gets back about it," Raven added to Scorch when she made a worried face.

Scorch nodded. Crowpelt had left yesterday to receive his nine lives and since the cats couldn't travel through Clan territory but had to go around the territories it was a long trek to the Moonpool. That was why Crowpelt had waited so long to leave, he had wanted to let Flickertail recover from going there the first time before leaving again.

"Anyways, are you willing to go to this meeting?" Raven's amber eyes went from face to face until a nod of consent came up.

"We will send a cat to this meeting," the ginger tom grumbled.

Scorch nodded happily, "Very good. Also, have you told every ThunderClan cat?"

Moonpaw nodded, "They all know, which is weird since Pinefur hasn't heard of it yet," the apprentice growled.

Scorch exchanged a glance with Raven. She signaled for Raven to follow her a little bit away from the group. "Which cats were Pinefur's spies?" She murmured.

Raven shook her head, "ThunderClan was much harder to track and I don't know their name. But there was only one spy. He had green eyes but I only saw him at night so I never even saw his fur color," Raven murmured.

"That ginger tom has green eyes," Scorch mewed, worriedly.

Raven shook her head at that, "I would have known if it were him, he's so big. This was a much slighter cat."

Scorch pondered for a moment and decided to ask Boulderpaw later. "But if Pinefur hasn't found out yet, could the spy have turned on Pinefur?" Scorch hoped that was it.

Raven shrugged, "Who knows? Maybe the spy wasn't able to trace it back to Moonpaw and is trying to find out who's behind it?" the black cat shook her head. "Let's just hope that it doesn't cause a problem. The spy only has to stay quiet for another half-moon or so."

They returned to the cats who were waiting in tense silence. Scorch turned to them, "One of you needs to be the cat to go to the meeting. Don't tell any other cat either. Should Pinefur by chance find out, then all the Clans are doomed. This is of the utmost importance." She waited for the cats to nod gravely before continuing. "Good, that is all. I will see you at the gathering."

The Clan cats nodded and quickly filed out of the beech hollow without a word, leaving the three of them alone. Scorch sighed and flicked her tail, "I wish I could keep a better eye on things here. And

WindClan," she added.

Raven swished her tail over the snow. "Nothing to do about it. We have to trust them. And in a way, that's better, you don't need that responsibility and they need to work for themselves."

"I should be with them," Boulderpaw growled.

Scorch gave him a side-long glance. The gray tom who had been silent and still the whole meeting was clawing at the snow in agitation as his fur prickled along his shoulders. Scorch felt wary as she sensed intense frustration flaming beneath his fur. Frustration made a cat feel trapped and when a cat felt trapped, they were liable to do unpredictable things.

"Let's go back to camp," she suggested quickly.

Raven mewed her agreement and she watched Boulderpaw for his reply. He was staring deeply in the direction of the ThunderClan forest, as if he could will himself there. Finally he sighed and nodded reluctantly, "Yeah, okay."

The trio started out of the clearing back to the ShadowClan camp. Scorch and Raven relaxed as they reentered the capaciously spaced pines, the soft pine scent was sweet in regards to the musty forest that smelt of dying foliage. But Boulderpaw eyed the tall trunks disdainfully and he walked with quick steps as if he didn't want his paws on the floor any longer then needed.

Scorch glanced back at him and veered him off the track. "You go on to camp," she called to Raven. "We have something we need to take care of."

Raven waved her tail to show she had heard and continued on the path. Scorch nudged Boulderpaw west toward rogue territory. "What now?" he growled.

Scorch walked in front of him with quick, jumpy steps as excitement streamed through her. "I had a thought a few nights ago," she mewed, glancing back over her shoulder at his glare.

"Please," he growled, "Continue."

Scorch ignored his sarcastic tone. "I realized that ShadowClan doesn't have a medicine-cat."

Boulderpaw's steps got less annoyed but he still sounded irritated. "Flickertail will just have to train one of them then," he growled.

"It will take too long," Scorch mewed, flicking her tail. "Newtlight's kits won't be born for another half-moon and they won't be able to be trained until they're at least four moons old. And there's no telling if one of them will have a talent for it."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Boulderpaw asked.

Scorch stopped and faced him, eyes glimmering brilliantly. "We're going to find the medicine-cat of NightClan," she announced.

Boulderpaw's fur bushed up instantly. "Are you joking?! You want Nightwing's medicine-cat?! No way!"

"Why not?" Scorch asked. "That cat was probably as skilled as any Clan medicine-cat. And with Nightwing dead, there's no reason why they should hate us. Raven didn't and neither does Hawk," Scorch mewed.

"They joined us while Nightwing was still alive!" Boulderpaw hissed, "Besides, a medicine-cat is a very important position in a Clan! You should know by now that the medicine-cat communes with StarClan."

Scorch twitched her tail, "And why wouldn't StarClan accept them? Besides, if there's really a problem, the cat can just heal until they get an apprentice and that cat can chat with StarClan."

Boulderpaw shook his head repeatedly. "No, no, no. The Clans will never agree to this even if we do convince this cat, if we can even find this cat!"

"I never said we would be successful," Scorch blinked. "But this is an issue that should be solved sooner than later. If we have to wait for Newtlight's kits, we have to wait. However, we can at least try to secure ShadowClan's stability right now." She flicked her tail and turned to continue on.

"You just don't understand the Clan ways!" Boulderpaw hissed.

"No, I don't," she mewed, flicking her tail crossly- why was he being so difficult? "If there's a cat that can help, why turn them away? For the sake of pride?"

"For the sake of the Clans!" Boulderpaw hissed, racing around in front of her and blocking her path with an attack crouch.

Scorch looked down at his narrowed eyes. "I care more about the lives that make up the Clans then the Clans themselves," she mewed. "What about you?"

She pushed past him roughly and didn't look back. How did she feel? She wasn't angry, there was no throbbing heat in her mind. She wasn't sad, she didn't feel cold or hollow in her belly. She just felt complacent. She had posed a question to Boulderpaw and now he needed to answer it. And she needed to continue her search.

Walking deeper into the forest the trees changed from pine back into oak and maple but Scorch relaxed. She had traversed this area for three moons and knew it as well as ShadowClan territory. Not far from where she was she knew would be the den where she and Painted and the others had stayed for so long.

She paused on a well worn trail in the snow which hadn't been a trail when she'd lived there. More than one cat had come this way and though the scent was mostly composed of misfit rogues, there was a common scent that could be the fading linger of NightClan. *Are they still living like a Clan?* Scorch felt warily curious as she headed off along the trail and slipped between the bushes the lines the trail.

It wasn't nearly as overgrown as ThunderClan's forest, but it still made more obstacles than in ShadowClan. She had forgotten how to watch where she put her paws and her head at the same time. She hissed in annoyance as an ivy tendril wrapped around her paw. Pulling it out roughly, she quickly rolled under a nearby bush as she heard gruff voices coming over to her in her moment of distraction.

Peering out of the bush, she spotted three cats making their way

along the trail that she had recently abandoned. A nervousness that she had never felt before took hold of her as they passed close by her hiding place. *Where are you, Boulderpaw?* She begged silently for him to appear along her scent track but when the cats had disappeared no gray tom showed up.

Sighing silently, she got to her paws and started following the trail again. She would just have to try to find a cat out alone to talk to. She was fairly certain that the cats were part of Nightwing's former group, they'd all been black pelted, but she hadn't been close enough to recognize anything more.

Not too much further, the trail split into two trails and Scorch followed the one that was more weathered into the snow. She quietly slunk along the trail, keeping low to the ground and close to cover while trying not to keep her ears listening for Boulderpaw's approach. *He's not coming*, she told herself. But it just felt wrong to do this sort of thing alone. They'd always gone on these crazy adventures together.

"Who goes there?" Scorch stiffened in her tracks as a voice rang out in the snowy forest. Turning her head slowly, she saw a lanky black tom with brown eyes standing erect on the trail just behind her. She hadn't even been aware of his approach. Looking at him for a moment, she thought he looked familiar, but since every cat had black fur it was hard to keep track of the different faces.

Scorch waited for a moment with bated breath as he looked around slowly. Had he seen her directly? Or only just heard something? "There's no cat there," a black cat mewed, coming up behind the tom. The she-cat had sleek black fur clinging to her skinny, young frame and dark hazel eyes glanced quickly around the black and white forest.

"I'm sure I heard something, Soot," the tom insisted.

"I hope you did," Soot ran her tongue across her muzzle, "I could do with a meal right about now."

The tom sighed, "Let's just get back to camp. Maybe some other cat had better luck hunting then we did."

The two carried on and Scorch pricked her ears. Hungry cats were usually easier to deal with. Shifting her paws on the snow she wondered if she should take a chance and go directly to their camp. They didn't seem particularly hostile at the very least. But she held back, what if Amelia was there? The black she-cat wouldn't be happy with her father's death and defeat for sure.

I'll just have to chance it. She was growing cold and hungry. She couldn't sit here for a day to wait until she got the right cat. She would just have to hope the cats had some decency. *Raven and Hawk weren't bad, after all.* Ignoring her thoughts of the many battles they'd fought with these cats, she pushed her way onto the trail again and headed quickly along it.

The camp, as she came upon it, was less a camp then a general base. There was no protection at all with the few dens being built against the outlying trees of a clearing. A hole was dug in the middle of the clearing and from scent it must have been the fresh-kill pile- but there was no prey there now.

A few cats lounged around the clearing, sleeping or talking quietly. Scorch's dark gaze alighted upon a skinny black she-cat in particular who was bent over a couple piles of leaves that she was meticulously sorting. *That's the cat.* Taking a deep breath, she padded out from behind the tree she was hiding behind and walked toward the middle of the clearing.

A hush fell over the cats as they looked toward her. No cat moved and not a word was spoken as Scorch surveyed them with an indifferent gaze until it settled upon the acting medicine-cat. "What do you want?" the black tom she had seen on the trail approached her, his brown eyes wary. "You're one of the Clan cats?" he asked warily.

Scorch flicked her tail, "No."

That seemed to relieve the tom, "Then what do you want, kit? We don't have any food to spare," he growled.

"I came to talk to your medicine-cat," Scorch mewed.

The tom narrowed his brown eyes, "What do you want with Nightshade?" he growled.

"Leave her be, Jet. I can handle this," the she-cat who had been crouched over the herbs came toward her. There was a detached air surrounding the she-cat but her eyes were relatively warm and their light heather-blue color added to the cool warmth.

Scorch dipped her head respectfully. "Who are you, kit?" Nightshade asked.

"My name is Scorch," she announced. A ripple of murmurs passed through the cats- she was sure they recognized the name even if they hadn't recognized her.

Nightshade's eyes widened and her whiskers quivered. "I had been told that you were killed before the battle," Nightshade murmured. Her eyes stayed cool but the warmth died from them as she eyed the scar on Scorch's neck.

Scorch flicked her tail, "That would be half-right. But I didn't come to talk about that."

"Then what did you come to talk about?" a cat growled, approaching behind Nightshade. Scorch instantly recognized Wing, the cat that had guarded her before handing her over to Nightwing to be killed.

"Wing," she greeted the cat coolly. She kept her anger under check but it was harder then she'd thought it would be to talk civilly with a cat that had handed her- a helpless kit- over to her death. If it hadn't been for Sonya, she really would have died.

Wing's brown eyes narrowed as she looked down at her and Scorch could sense a haunted horror lingering in them that the small she-cat was trying desperately to cover up. "There's nothing for you here. Go home," Wing growled.

Scorch tilted her head and angled her ears over to the empty fresh-kill pile. "The Clans did defeat Nightwing, but there's is something that we yet need," she mewed.

"And that would be?" Nightshade questioned.

"A medicine-cat for ShadowClan," Scorch answered, staring the she-cat straight in the eye.

Shock plastered itself on the black faces around her and the silence was echoed by the falling of dusk upon the forest. Brilliant red illuminating the western clouds with bloody beauty.

Nightshade began shaking her head hastily, "I couldn't leave my cats. We are a Clan now."

"You won't be for long," Scorch mewed. Every cat in the clearing was fur and ribs. They had clearly never been talented hunters without the Clan cats and while recovering from the battle they had lost both energy and skill.

"But I couldn't leave them to suffer alone. Especially not with cats who caused that suffering in the first place," Nightshade added sharply.

Scorch lashed her tail, rage flaring up through her like a firestorm of emotion. "You cats were the ones that caused the first suffering!" she spat. "You invaded the Clans territory, killed their kits, and stole every scrap of dignity and freedom like prey from them! For seasons! What you are suffering now is nothing compared to the pain you put onto innocents!" Scorch seethed.

Shock and guilt was flowing around the camp so thickly that Scorch could feel it in her fur- they were more sympathetic now that they were the ones suffering. She took a deep, steadying breath. "However, I am not one to see cats suffering and do nothing, despite what they have done. I invite you to come to join ShadowClan and RiverClan," she mewed. She vaguely recalled Sunstar's unwillingness to help any cat but his own, but the truth was that the Clans were weak and that they needed more cats to fill in the gaps.

Cats were looking confusedly at one another around the clearing. Finally Nightshade nodded, "If that offer is open to everyone, then I would like very much to return to Clan territory. I miss it there."

Wing looked at them both and stepped back with another word. "I would rather not," the she-cat grumbled.

Scorch turned as a pretty, slender she-cat with glossy black fur and stormy blue eyes padded toward her, herding two kits in front of her that were so weak they could hardly support themselves. "If the Clans would take care of my kits, I would join them in a heartbeat," she murmured.

A black tom with silver paws and distraught gray eyes approached the queen. "You would leave me, Storm?" he asked the she-cat.

Storm's blue eyes swam with pain and she nodded her head, "The kits need a place to grow strongly and safely, Shade," she murmured.

Shade took a deep breath, "They also need their father, I will go too."

Around the clearing cats were murmuring, discussing whether they would stay or go. By the end, nearly half the cats chose to go while half of them faced their departing friends with weak smiles and best wishes. Scorch nodded, besides Storm and Shade and their kits and Nigthshade, she also had a tom named Jack, Soot, and a black she-cat named Rita in her entourage.

They headed out into the forest in solemn procession and Scorch felt her nervousness grow. What would she say to Sunstar about this? He certainly wouldn't be happy and none of the other Clan cats had ever seemed particularly forgiving to their tormentors.

"What's wrong? You seem anxious," Nightshade mewed.

Scorch flicked her tail, "It's nothing. The Clan cats will probably just have a hard time adjusting to living with you cats again."

"But, didn't they ask you to come get us?" Shade asked, puzzled.

Scorch twitched her ears, "They've never once asked me to do anything," she responded.

"So they don't know we're coming?" Storm sounded nervous as she

ushered her toppling kits in front of her. They were probably nearly five moons old but they were so small and weak that a harsh wind would blow them away. Scorch had ever felt so big before.

"No, they don't. But I'll figure it out for you. All you have to do is follow the warrior-code and work hard. They'll appreciate you soon enough," Scorch mewed.

"Are you sure of that?" Rita asked, the high-stepping she-cat looked jumpy and nervous. "They did kill us and they fought like monsters."

"So it isn't monster-like to let a defenseless cat be murdered?" Scorch asked drily.

An unsettling air came over them as pelts prickled up in defense. "We are sorry that Nightwing did that to you. We were never the types to let kits die. But you did survive, at least," Nightshade mewed optimistically.

Scorch kept her eyes focused on the trail ahead of her. "Never mind that. What's done is done. And we just need to focus on getting you into the Clans." Scorch paused at the ShadowClan border and frowned. She turned to the cats, "I think it would be better if I go get the leaders and talk to them before I bring you to the camp. They might think that you're attacking if you just show up." The cats milled around uncertainly and Scorch started off at a swift pace for the camp.

Upon entering the quite camp, she headed straight for Sunstar's den as curious gazes followed her. "Sunstar?" she called, entering the shadowy den. The leader was eating a meal with Willowwater and both cats looked up at her expectantly- Sunstar with a rather annoyed hint in his gaze. "I need you to come with me," she mewed awkwardly. "Crowstar too," she added as she saw the black leader in the back of the den, discussing things with his own deputy.

Surprisingly, Sunstar didn't protest as he stood up, "Watch the camp," he ordered Willowwater.

Crowstar stood too but Thistlebranch shook her head, "I'll go for

Crowstar, he had a long trek the last couple days. He needs to rest." Scorch nodded and lead the two impressive cats toward the entrance of the murmuring camp.

She turned and caught Boulderpaw's gaze from where he sat beside Flashpaw outside the apprentices den. His gaze was blank and Flashpaw turned to whisper something in his ear which made him laugh. Heat flashed through her pelt as she realized she was staring and she turned her gaze firmly in front of her.

Scorch led them silently and swiftly over the snow and through the dignified pine trees until she slowed down, the border just out of sight. She turned to the two cats and drew in a breath, "Before I tell you what this is about. I'm going to show you. And before you tell me that I'm crazy, I already know."

She led the last few lengths to the border where the black cats were gathered in a huddled and miserable heap with the kits keeping warm in the middle. Sunstar hissed and the fur on gentle Thistlebranch's fur fluffed up at the sight of them.

"Scorch, I don't know what you were thinking. But, no, I won't deal with this!" Sunstar growled.

Scorch faced him on the cats behalf. "They are freezing and starved, I think we should help them."

Thistlebranch stepped forward and looked down on her gravely. "They invaded our territory. They killed our kin. They stole everything we had and forced us to work for little more than nothing. We fought at the expensive of our comrades' lives to defeat them. And now you want us to invite them back into our camp?" the tortoiseshell shook her head dumbly. "No."

But Scorch wasn't about to give up. "Then this is your chance to prove that you're better than them! The warrior-code boasts compassion and mercy. Why not show every cat how close you are to your roots?" she begged.

Sunstar growled, "We don't need to show anything. And the warrior-code only applies to Clan-cats."

"Well, *I'm* not a Clan cat. And half the cats that won the fight against Nightwing weren't Clan-cats either."

"They are now!" Sunstar spat back, "And you never tried to harm the Clans. You tried to help them. That makes you an honorary warrior."

Then why always treat me like a kit? The irritating thought flashed through her mind and she pushed it away. "But these are kits that are suffering! They are too young to have hurt any cat," Scorch indicated the kits that were shivering in the middle.

Thistlebranch's eyes softened, "But then they are too young to leave their mother," she mewed quietly.

Storm stepped forward, "I never laid a paw on any Clan-cat. And I hated Nightwing as much as any Clan-cat," the rogue declared.

Sunstar narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "Why? You were one of his precious allies. He spoiled you all like kits."

Storm turned her feisty blue gaze on the leader. "He invited me into a place of warmth and safety while I was heavy with my kits and my mate and I agreed. But when he killed two of our kits that weren't black furred we never forgave him. I never did a thing for him and Shade wouldn't have either had Nightwing not used the kits and I as leverage."

Scorch turned her gaze hopefully back on Sunstar and Thistlebranch. Couldn't they see these were cats that were unable to hurt them? They just needed help. "They suffered like Clan-cats at the paws of Nightwing. Shouldn't we help them?" She urged.

Nightshade stepped forward, "And I never hurt any cat either. In fact, I remember helping them."

Thistlebranch's gaze wavered, "That is true. You were kind- for one of Nightwing's cats," the deputy admitted. Then she turned to Sunstar, "I think we can take in Storm and her kits and Nightshade."

Scorch's stomach somersaulted. "What about the others?" she looked forlornly at the hurt gazes of the other black cats. Shade especially

looked horrified at the thought of having to be separated from his mate and kits.

Sunstar shook his head. "We can't take in cats that once bared their fangs against our Clan-mates. But we can take in these few and give them safety and shelter. For now, at least." The leader and deputy turned away. "You can accept or refuse," he added as they padded away a few paces for them to make their decisions.

Scorch turned to them, guilty and crestfallen. "I'm sorry, I really thought I could convince them."

Rita purred, "It's alright. I'm just glad that the kits will get somewhere safe and warm to stay for the rest of leaf-bare. Honestly, I'm surprised they allowed that many cats to join."

Jack and Soot murmured their agreement. "We'll just go back home. It's almost time for the warm season, we can make it through," Soot mewed optimistically.

But Shade was sullen, "Are you really going to leave me?" he begged Storm.

Storm's eyes looked drenched in sadness. "We won't stay any longer then we need to," she promised. "Then we'll come find you. But our kits... I don't know if they can survive one more night in this cold. Let alone the rest of the season. I'm sorry," they touched noses sadly but resolutely as their kits mewled pitifully at their paws.

Nightshade paced in agitation around the cluster of cats. "I can't go if we all can't go. They need a cat to take care of them back at camp," the she-cat muttered.

"You should go, Nightshade," Rita urged. "Amelia has been threatening you again. You should leave while you can."

"Amelia?!" Scorch's fur bushed on end at the name. "She was living with you?"

Soot shook her head, "No, she just drops in sometimes and eats our fresh-kill- the greedy pig. But she is Nightwing's daughter and no one can beat her in a fight. She talks of taking revenge sometime.

But no cat will fight such a hopeless battle for her and she won't hurt us," the she-cat shrugged.

Scorch felt a little unnerved about the news that Amelia was looking for revenge. But without a force, what could one cat do? When the cats had given their goodbyes and Storm and Shade had shared a tearful farewell, Scorch led the few remaining cats back to Sunstar and Thistlebranch.

Sunstar nodded and he and Thistlebranch each took a tired kit by the scruff and led them back to camp. "But, Scorch," Sunstar mewed, "You're the one who's going to explain this to the others."

Scorch flicked her tail, "I don't think an explanation will be needed. Just tell them that it was my idea."

"Are you sure? They might want to know why you did this," Thsitlebranch mumbled through her kit's fur.

"I'm sure," Scorch mewed. "The cats will either not need an explanation or they won't believe it. So why bother?"

Thistlebranch snorted and Sunstar rolled his eyes. And in a spirit of mirth they all walked into the camp together.

Chapter 45: Battle Plan

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Half of a milky white moon hung high in a tenebrous sky, lost amidst the expanse of countless silver stars. The winter clouds had rolled away on a stiff, cold wind and left the night undisturbed for the first gathering of Clan cats for several seasons.

Scorch sat upon the crossing trunk to the sacred island, her tail hanging down and whisking over the sparkling ice as she watched the horizon of shadows for movement. Herself, Willowwater, Thistlebranch, and Flickertail had arrived just as the sun sank and had waited in nearly perfect silence for the arrival of the WindClan and ThunderClan cats.

"It's too cold to wait all night," Willowwater growled in a low voice to Thistlebranch, who nodded in agreement.

"Patience," Flickertail flicked his tail over his Clan-mate's ear. "They have to sneak away from a heavy guard in their own territory. We shouldn't be so impatient."

Willowwater snorted but stayed quiet as she sat down in the shadow of the exposed roots of the crossing tree. "I just hope those cats don't take this as a chance to cause trouble while we're gone."

Scorch flicked her tail crossly. "Those cats" were undoubtedly Nightshade, Storm, and Storm's two kits- Fling and Swish. The Clan cats hadn't been particularly happy to welcome them into their home but they'd made grudging accommodations for the queen and her kits and ruefully accepted Nightshade's medical help. Scorch had taken the blunt of the scowls and grumbles for them and made it her duty to shield the kits from the discontent about their presence. She was always playing with them and cheerfully making them acquainted with the cats in the camp and had grown quite attached to the three-moon old cats. Fling- the tom- and Swish- the she-kit- had quickly become attached to the warrior-code and Clan

pride and through harmless activity endeared themselves to even some of the wary Clan cats.

Scorch had been especially surprised and pleased with Newtlight, who had quickly founded a friendship with Storm in the nursery and, of course, Mira got along well with just about every cat. Possibly an even more surprising friendship had been Nightshade and Painted. The two seemed to have formerly known each other as rogues and were quick to chat together at meal times and on walks that they took on the warmer evenings.

In any case, the cats were settling in and this was the perfect time to strike Pinefur down and free the lake from the remaining tyrants. *This will all be over soon!* Scorch curled her tail happily at the mere thought. She could already imagine it. Free of oppression just in time for the new season. It would taste even sweeter to be done with both troubles at once.

"I can see some cats," Thistlebranch's mew alerted them to two shadows approaching along the silvery, snowy shore from the direction of the two expected Clans. Tasting the air, Scorch identified the mingled scent of ThunderClan and WindClan- leafy and heathery.

"Good, we can finally get this over with," Willowwater growled, getting to her paws as Scorch leaped down beside her to greet the cats. The two shadow cats were approaching the opposite end of the tree-bridge and Scorch could identify the shorter, stouter shadow cat as Flightfrost from WindClan. But she didn't recognize the ThunderClan cat.

"That's Flightfrost from WindClan. It's good to see he made it through," Thistlebranch mewed. "He was one of WindClan's best. Apprentices were always told to avoid him in a fight back before this happened," the deputy added to Scorch.

Scorch's ears pricked, impressed that she'd been so lucky as to find an outstanding warrior like that to help her. "What about the ThunderClan cat?" she asked, nodding at the shadow following Flightfrost.

"I think it's Wispheart," Willowwater mewed, her eyes flashed with indefinite emotion and then faded back to their usual cool green.

"Who?" Scorch asked, turning to Flickertail.

"She is a ThunderClan warrior. About my age. She was mates with a cat named Scampfur and had two kits- uh... was it a Leafkit and Boulderkit? Or maybe it was Rockkit..." Flickertail shook his head. "She wasn't anything special to talk about, but all warriors are supposed to be capable."

But Scorch's mind was spinning, was this Leafpaw's mother? The she-cat had stormy-gray fur that glistened silver in the moonlight and her lighter paws and ears shone white. Her figure was dainty and she seemed too fragile to be a strong warrior, but the razor edge in her blue-gray eyes told a story of suffering and strength beyond what Scorch could fathom.

"What happened to her mate, Scampfur?" she murmured.

"Murdered. Before Pinefur and Nightwing took over, but it wasn't long before and it is assumed that he was killed by one of those two groups while they were lurking around," the medicine-cat whispered, but then flicked his tail over her muzzle as the two cats came within ear-shot, signaling for her to be quiet.

"Alright, we're all here," Flightfrost mewed. His ice blue eyes skimmed over them and Willowwater stepped forward to meet it.

"Flightfrost, Wispheart," the she-cat mewed, nodding her head courteously. "I am the new RiverClan deputy and Thistlebranch is the new ShadowClan deputy. We have come here on behalf of our Clans."

Wispheart stepped forward, "And what do your Clans say? Whispers of rebellion against Pinefur have circulated through both Clans. But what do you plan to do to help defeat that monster? And why would you help?" the she-cat challenged.

The two deputies flashed a glance between them. Willowwater turned back to the other cats and cleared her throat. "As you may

have been aware, we were under the tyranny of Nightwing. We recently managed to defeat him and his force. But we are still very weak. However, we are indeed aware that Pinefur is a threat to all of the Clans. And we fear that if he heard that Nightwing were defeated that he would try to conquer us. And we admit to know that we wouldn't stand a chance against him. That is why we are willing to help you," the silver tabby mewed.

"As for how we will help you," the she-cat paused, dipping her head to Thistlebranch and the tortoiseshell took over.

"Sunstar and Crowstar are cautious to bet the whole Clan on this rebellion. So the support we give will be voluntary. No cat is being ordered to help you. Still, I think a significant force can still be expected. No cat wants Pinefur hanging over our heads and we would like to separate our Clans as quickly as possible. Something we cannot do as long as Pinefur is alive."

Wispheart narrowed her eyes, "But you can't actually promise anything?" the she-cat inquired.

Thistlebranch shuffled her paws nervously and looked helplessly at Willowwater. The silver deputy stared Wispheart hard in the eye, "We are offering support. You can't expect us to fight your battles for you."

"I didn't say you should," the ThunderClan cat answered back harshly. "But if you can't even promise us any support, why should we risk our necks- and the necks of our kits- to do something that we've already failed at several times? Why would this time be any different?"

"The difference is that this time you do have outside support. We can easily offset the little advantage of power that Pinefur has over you!" Willowwater yowled, frustration sharply edging her voice.

Scorch looked somberly at the cats around her. This bunch of squirming, anxious, and temper-flaring cats wouldn't be able to coordinate an important battle such as the one as they had in front of them.

Scorch stood up between the two quarreling she-cats. She turned seriously to Wispheart, "*I* will fight for your Clans," she pledged.

Wispheart looked down at her with wide eyes, then narrowed them and turned her head with a snort, "What will one kit do?" she muttered, but Scorch senses a grudging appreciation prickle from her.

Flightfrost nodded as well, "I think we can trust that we will receive the help that we need from these cats if we promise to fight as well. Which WindClan has already sworn to do."

Wispheart nodded at him, "We've already agreed to fight as well. This will be the last stand that we can take. We have to win or we die."

Scorch nodded, "Then I believe that calls for a very good battle plan."

Wispheart's eyes lit up for the first time with interest. The gray she-cat sat down on the snow and unsheathed her claws, scoring deep furrows in the snow. "And this is why I was the one to come," the gray she-cat murmured.

Scorch curiously looked at the map that Wishpheart was quickly drawing. Her mind sparked with intrigue as she saw the plan being drawn out. "No," she corrected one of Wispheart's silent swipes, "Over here instead," she mewed, indicating a part of the forest.

Wisphear paused and nodded, "Yeah, that's better." Scorch critically watched the rest of it and nodded her approval, turning to the confused cats with a purr.

"This certainly is a battle plan that will lead us to victory."

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The date of the battle had been decided. Only five days after the half-moon meeting since every cat agreed the sooner the better. And Scorch was out the next day in order to put the battle strategy into action. Of course, since she would be in ThunderClan territory for the preparation work, who better to help but Boulderpaw?

But the gray apprentice grumbled and growled all the way there and was slow in his work as she set up twice as many traps as he did. "Is this even going to work?" Boulderpaw complained. "It's kind of obvious."

"Yes, it is," Scorch huffed, pausing from her digging. "But it will be dark and they won't be able to see all the holes we've dug. Only we will be able to avoid them and they'll twist their paws and fall over each other. It will be easy pickings for us," Scorch purred.

"But what if they find this and they know it's there?" Boulderpaw asked worriedly. They were deep in Clan territory, in a place that Wispheart has assured them cats rarely traveled, but deep in the borders nonetheless.

"The Clan cats said they'd try to avoid going this way so that Pinefur's cats don't find it. Besides, there are tall bushes all around this clearing. It's deserted and protected. We're fine," Scorch assured him.

"What about WindClan territory? Are we gonna dig a bunch of rabbit tunnels?" he grumbled.

"Painted and Raven are taking care of those traps. And they're not digging holes, instead they're setting up other traps," Scorch mewed.

"What other traps?" Boulderpaw asked.

"I think they were going to... you're not even listening!" Scorch pouted as she saw Boulderpaw looking forlornly at the tops of the trees.

"No, I'm listening," he mewed with a distant tone.

"No, you're not," Scorch huffed, stomping in front of him and leaning so close he had to pull his gaze from the sky to her. "You've been like this ever since we took in those black cats. When are you going to get over it?"

Anger flashed in his eyes, "When are you going to understand? What you are doing, it's against the warrior-code!"

"It's against the warrior-code to help cats?" Scorch challenged.

"Help *Clan* cats! You've done more to help the Clans enemies than the actual Clans!" Boulderpaw shouted angrily in her face.

She looked at him, hurt and scared in the face of his frustrated rage. "I helped save ShadowClan and RiverClan, I've... All I've done since I've gotten here is help the Clans!" she shouted back, feeling heat rush through her throat as tears pricked at her eyes.

"You've done practically nothing! Your plans never worked- it was Sunstar's that won in the end- you couldn't help fight, and Flickertail cared for way more cats than you! And how many of the Clans enemies have you invited and forced Clan cats to take care of? Painted, Mira, Jump, Raven, Hawk... And then Nightshade, Storm, and those two kits! The Clans are weak right now, they can't take care of all these extra cats that won't give anything back."

Scorch could feel anger in her belly bubble as Boulderpaw insulted her friends. "Those cats fought as hard as any Clan cat and they hunt as well too! And what about the rogues that Sunstar brought back?" she challenged, glaring at his face.

He looked away, "As leader, he has that right."

"Don't give me that! Sunstar agreed to these cats living with them, and Crowstar! They have that right too! It doesn't matter if I'm the one that found them!" She stepped loser, forcing him to back up a pace or look her in the eye.

Boulderpaw turned away, "I'm going home," he growled.

Scorch watched him, still seething as he pushed his way out of the clearing. She shoved her paw back into the frozen earth, scraping as hard as she could at the frost-bitten ground. "Anger isn't a very smart emotion." She jerked her muzzle up, startled. But she sighed when she saw the hazy black form of Time.

"Oh, it's just you," she muttered.

"Were you expecting some cat else?" Time inquired.

"No, but I am in enemy territory," she mewed, returning to her work with less fervor.

She worked in silence for a while with Time looking on broodingly. "You're making yourself too busy to train with me," the black cat lamented.

Scorch shrugged, sitting back and panting as she pulled her dirty and aching paws from the hole she had just finished. Inspecting her claws she saw that several were bent and they were all black with dirt. A few red smudges on her paw pads wasn't enough to make her pause for more than a moment.

"I like being busy," she mewed. "Makes the time go faster. And I like feeling that I'm changing something," she added, quietly.

"You could change a lot more than all this," Time sighed.

Scorch looked at him, "Do you know how the battle will go?" she asked.

Time shook his head, "I told you. As long as you or Sonya are alive, I'm relieved of my knowledge. Not that I would tell you if I could. Part of our responsibility is not to change things. I'm glad I gave the future to Sonya," Time added.

Scorch shrugged, "I wouldn't use it for anything bad. I wonder if Sonya knows-"

"I've already ordered her to keep quiet about it," Time interrupted harshly. "Changing the future has dire consequences for the wielder of future knowledge. Sonya knows this too."

Scorch sighed, these rules for their powers seemed to get heavier and heavier. "So, how did you even give us our powers, anyways?" she asked.

Time looked away, his sharp red eyes narrowed. "I can only give these powers away once every hundred moons. To two kits of the moon."

Scorch looked up, "Kits of the moon?" she echoed.

Time shrugged, "It is a broad label, really. It refers to an ancient family of cats that I was once part of. They later scattered to the ends of the earth. Their descendants are the ones I'm able to burden with my responsibility. A 'Share the Wealth' kind of set-up," Time smiled wryly.

Scorch stared at him intently. It was curious to think that her ancestors had once been part of such a group, and the same as Sonya's at that. "What did these cats do? That you were a part of?"

But Time shook his head, "What they did has long been erased from history. Their only lasting effect is my burden that they laden me with. And even this has little significance outside of the lives that it effects," Time took his turn to shrug. "But it is important for you to begin training. If we don't begin soon your powers will eventually take over you," he mewed seriously, his red eyes reprimanding her.

Scorch looked at him, startled. "And what would that do?"

"You've already experienced it," Time flicked his tail. "Except you wouldn't just be detached into a place of tangible time. You would be lost in it. I've gone there once. And several other cats have as well. It is not pleasant and you will not live for long like that," the black tom warned.

Scorch stood up, fear trickling like icy tails down her spine. "What happened to those cats?"

Time looked away, "They went crazy," he muttered. "But that is easy to avoid as long as you start working with me," he mewed.

Scorch, now wary, nodded. "Alright, what do you need me to do?"

"I need you to meet me when you can give me your full attention. We will need to meet outside Clan territory and it will take some time. But if you work hard, we will only need to meet every other day for a moon and then only once a moon after that," Time mewed, standing up and pacing.

"Why once a moon?" Scorch asked.

"Because your powers increase as you grow. They will never cease

to grow until you die. But you'll learn to adapt to the changes on your own. Right now while they're still growing quickly you need the most guidance," Time paused and nodded beyond the clearing. "You better get moving."

Scorch glanced back where he had nodded and jumped as she heard the crunching of paws over the snow. She turned back, but Time has disappeared and she dove across the clearing for cover in a juniper bush, halting in the cover it offered. The cats she heard didn't enter the clearing and they never paused or got close enough for her to identify them. But she knew she needed to be going before they did discover her.

Creeping out from the bush, she glanced around the forest to make sure no cat was in sight and started out, keeping low over the snow and wishing her red and black pelt blended in as nicely with the snow as it had with the leaf-covered forest floor.

But the forest was quite deserted and she didn't get a sniff of anything at all on her way out. *I hope that the thaw comes soon*, it seemed the forest was clean out of prey and thinking back, the ThunderClan and WindClan cats had been far skinnier than the slim ShadowClan and RiverClan cats.

She assumed this was because the snow didn't get quite so deep under the pines as it did here. And there were less cats even with all the rogues they'd taken in than Pinefur's Clans. But that problem would solve itself soon without much more of her help. And then she was sure she could give Time what he needed to train her. And then... well, she'd figure that out later.

Scorch crossed the border just as the light started to fade away from the gray sky. Twilight coating everything as the night fog formed over the smooth snow and tangled together beneath the pine trees. The comforting silence dulled the far-off sounds and lulled her into a sense of security that carried her safely to the camp which she entered unseen.

Obeying her belly's orders, she went and grabbed for herself a shrew that was still slightly warm and ate it quickly. Pausing to clean her whiskers as cats retreated to their dens when the air

quickly turned frosty in the absence of sunlight. The cold didn't bother her though, it didn't have the painful tone as it had deep in the cold season. She fluffed her pelt against the chill and worked on carefully cleaning her dirty paws without hurting them.

"Hey, Scorch." She looked up at Flashpaw's hesitant mew. The black apprentice's eyes were anxious, "Have you seen Boulderpaw? I just didn't see him come into camp with you and I was wondering where he was..."

"He's not back yet?" Scorch asked, shock vibrating beneath her pelt.

Flashpaw perceived her emotion and her eyes widened, "No, why isn't he back yet?"

Scorch shook her head and got to her paws, ruefully seeing that she'd only cleaned one. "I don't know. He left long before I did. I thought he would have gotten here well before dusk."

"Did Pinefur catch him? Why didn't you stay with him? You can't split up in enemy territory!" Flashpaw's accusatory tone cut Scorch sharply.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. She should have made more of an effort to make him stay, it had been foolish to let him go off all alone. *But it was his territory!* He was more foolish to leave me all alone. But she ignored that thought. "Maybe he did come back and went out hunting again and you just didn't notice?" she suggested.

"But *why* would stay out after dark when it's getting so cold? We should tell Sunstar," Flashpaw mewed quickly, turning toward the leaders den.

"Wait!" Scorch protested quickly, stopping Flashpaw. "We don't need to get every cat into a frenzy. I don't think it's likely that Boulderpaw got captured. There was hardly any cat out when I was there and I was close enough to the camp that I should have heard the commotion if he was caught. He's probably just out in the forest," she reasoned.

Flashpaw still didn't look convinced but she nodded, "Let's go

looking for him," she mewed.

Distressed, Scorch stared at her. She knew that if Boulderpaw was out alone, he didn't want to be found. He was a smart cat, he could come home on his own. "I don't think that's necessary..." she began. But Flashpaw ignored her and started off for the entrance.

Scorch looked after her, undecided. Then she sighed, she couldn't allow Flashpaw to go out on her own when there was hungry owls and foxes about. Not that she thought the search would be very successful, Boulderpaw was sure to be hiding in a place where he couldn't be found and she was probably the last one he wanted to see. She didn't know why, but he wasn't willing to let this rogue thing go and she would bet he wouldn't be willing to let it go anytime soon.

The forest was colder than the camp and her breath dispersed into the air as visible vapors. The snow crackled under her weight but the shadows blocked her view of most anything and she depended upon her whiskers and nose to follow Flashpaw.

"The clouds must have thickened," Flashpaw mewed from somewhere up ahead. "It wasn't this dark earlier. He may have gotten lost," the she-cat sounded worried and Scorch snorted.

Her paws were painfully frozen and her ears and nose ached in the cold while she shivered uncontrollably with no end to this search in sight yet. She was sure Boulderpaw was fine and she was sure that she was going to be annoyed with him when they found him. Besides that, Scorch was certain that a Boulderpaw could find his way along a trail back to camp as easily as she could.

"Did you catch his scent?" Scorch asked when Flashpaw stopped, her tail tip flicking over Scorch muzzle in the black gloom.

"No," Flashpaw sighed. "I just thought I heard something. Let's keep moving." The apprentice plowed forward and Scorch followed in her paw-prints- sliding soundlessly over the snow. Scorch was sure she hadn't heard anything and she didn't smell anything. But she had another sense besides the natural ones. And she sensed they were being watched.

However, it wasn't a malicious sense and she recognized the feeling. A feeling of intrigued curiosity and queer purpose, where had she felt this before? Feeling her fur prickle along her spine, she sped up to Flashpaw's side. "I think we should go back," Scorch murmured low into Flashpaw's ear.

"No! We need to find Boulderpaw!" Flashpaw protested, her gray eyes cutting brightly across the darkness.

"Flashpaw, please," she begged. She didn't know what was out here with them and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. "I think we're being watched. Let's go back now," she mewed urgently. Scorch knew that whoever was watching her wasn't any of her close friends and it wasn't Sonya or Time- she couldn't sense them- so she hoped it was just a Clan cat she didn't know very well but she couldn't be sure.

"But if there's something dangerous out here, then we have to find him!" Flashpaw argued, her voice growing louder.

Scorch stiffened as she felt the sensation of purpose grow and move. The sense was coming from above them now. *I know this tactic!* Feeling fear taking a hold of her, she lunged forward and grabbed Flashpaw's scruff, dragging the bigger cat out of the way a moment before a heavy weight fell to the ground where they had been- groaning and growling as it missed it's mark and stumbled over the earth.

"What the-" Flashpaw gasped.

"Run! Follow me and be quiet about it!" Scorch hissed, darting off into the murky dark. She made sure Flashpaw was on her tail before she concentrated on sounds of pursuit. Soft paws whisked over the snow far behind them with an echoing hint that was quickly fading as the cat caught up.

"Who is that?" Flashpaw panted through gritted teeth.

Scorch didn't respond, breathing too hard herself as she pushed her exhausted limbs to stay ahead of the larger apprentice. Her eyes, picking out shapes as she led them into more familiar footing for

her, spotted the one she was looking for.

"Keep on my tail," she hissed. And with a leap she cleared a drift of snow taller than her and her paws slid in perfect timing into a small cave that arched above the snow. She curved her body as she slid to a halt deep in the cave and Flashpaw's heavy body slammed into her and pinned her against the wall.

Their silent breaths hung into the pith-black hole and Scorch listened in tense silence, not daring to move, as paw-steps thundered past near-by, haltering to a stop as their trail ended. Flashpaw's soft fur bristled and her breath came in tiny gasps as their pursuer circled around with slow, searching steps.

Scorch could just spy a pair of thin, black legs stalk past the entrance of the cavern and then disappear. Moments passed into minutes and the paw-steps eventually faded away and the cat scent gradually faded.

"Do you think she's gone?" Flashpaw whispered.

"Shh!" Scorch hushed her and slowly pushed the apprentice off of her, crouching in the cave and heading to the back of the hole. This was a rabbit den that had been enlarged once by a badger or a fox, but the rabbit tunnel still remained. "Follow me," she whispered, creeping slowly down the tunnel.

It wasn't difficult for her wiggle through, but she could hear Flashpaw's labored breaths and knew it was a tighter squeeze for the bigger she-cat. The tunnel wound through the earth and several smaller tunnels branched off, but Scorch kept to the largest and eventually cold night air infiltrated the frozen, stuffiness of the tunnel.

"There," she sighed in relief as she emerged from the tunnel. She stood and pushed her way through the untouched snowy fern that veiled the entrance and it showered her with freezing snow as she brushed past it. She shook it off and paused to look back at Flashpaw. "The ShadowClan border is right there, we can get back to camp in not much time," she mewed to the RiverClan cat.

Flashpaw nodded, her body shivering in the cold air. "But we still didn't find Boulderpaw..."

Scorch sighed, "I think we've been through enough without worrying about him. He's probably back at camp right now. Let's just go," she mewed, taking the lead back under the pines and on a trail worn smooth through the snow and familiarly comforting to her tired paws.

"Who was that cat that chased us?" Flashpaw asked as the camp came in sight.

Scorch stiffened. What could she say? To the Clan, she was supposed to be dead. "It was just a rogue," she mewed.

"But didn't her scent seem kind of familiar?" Flashpaw pressed, her tone wary and Scorch could feel the black she-cat turning her head from side to side behind Scorch.

"Not particularly. She just smelled like a rogue. Maybe it's because Sunstar had so many join us recently she smelled familiar?" Scorch shrugged in the dark and hoped that it would appease Flashpaw.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Flashpaw sniffed. The black she-cat pushed past her into the thorn entrance. "I'm going to go look for Boulderpaw in the camp, and I'm not stopping until I find him!"

Scorch watched her head into camp and she paused outside of it. She could almost picture her warm nest lined with thick moss and extra feathers. She wasn't even cold, she was so tired. But Flashpaw was serious and with that cat lurking around she couldn't let Flashpaw go out on her own.

Besides, she had just caught Boulderpaw's scent. As she followed the scent, it lead around the camp and up to a little glade that was one of the few places that one could see the sky in the pine forest. It was within shouting distance of the camp but far enough away that a cat wouldn't be heard or scented from camp.

It was one of Scorch's favorite spots to go with Boulderpaw on a sunny day. And tonight he sat like a cat carved from his namesake

in the middle of the clearing at the pinnacle of the glade's height. Faint gray light slightly shadowing him against the scenery.

"We've been looking for you," Scorch mewed, marching up the hill to the small clearing.

His eyes didn't flick to her, "I didn't ask you to." To her relief, he didn't sound as annoyed as he had for the last few days.

"No," she admitted. "But Flashpaw was obstinate about it."

He still didn't move. "She's too clingy."

"She's lost a lot," Scorch defended their friend. "Flashpaw may be annoying sometimes, but she's the only apprentice in RiverClan *and* ShadowClan. When we leave she'll be all alone."

"She has her Clan-mates. I would rather have that than friends," Boulderpaw mewed.

Scorch stared at him, halting on the incline a few tail-lengths below him. "Do you really mean that?" she asked quietly, keeping all her injured emotion out of her voice.

"I don't know. It's what I like to think. But I can't remember very well ever being without friends. I just remember being without my Clan-mates- without my kin. And I wish it were the other way." His voice wasn't sad or nostalgic, it was wondering and pondering.

"But aren't friends sort of like kin?" Scorch asked. She felt that way. It was why she didn't miss her parents as much as she had. Her friends were so dear to her, she couldn't imagine leaving them. But she couldn't imagine never seeing her parents again. Deep, conflicting desires pulled at opposite ends of her and her heart was left spinning.

"Maybe..." Boulderpaw's answer was prolonged as he gazed up at the cloud-veiled sky. "But friends can't replace kin. There's a sort of sense with family that you can't get with friends. Knowing that no matter what happens they'll always be there. A trust that's bound by blood."

"Does blood really hold so much meaning? Every living thing has blood, yes, but every living thing also has a free spirit. A spirit not bound by blood," Scorch murmured softly, indicating a lone star that shone through the tumultuous black clouds. "Those spirits aren't bound by anything."

"Except the sky," Boulderpaw answered, sighing and getting to his paws and staring down at her. "I can't explain it to you. You've proven that you can't possibly understand the tight links among the Clans. A cat's interest, desires, ambitions, relations, and emotions end at their border. I can't care about what happens outside of it. I'm only here to help ThunderClan and taking in rogues isn't helping them. That's why I'm against it, because I think it will hinder more than help. And that is why I'm not interested in being 'friends' with Flashpaw. We are from different Clans and she's going to have to face it sooner than later."

Scorch listened to him in strict silence. She understood his words, she knew what he was saying, but she couldn't comprehend *why*. He was right, she wasn't a born Clan cat. She couldn't imagine living in such a small world as simply one Clan. To be born to it, to grow in it, and die in it. It was too small- it was suffocating.

But did Boulderpaw really believe what he was saying?

She had sensed it- just barely- the guilt of a cat unable to follow their own way of life. A tiny prickle of frustration, gleeful freedom, guilt, and anxiousness mingled together in a tight ball that was usually pushed to the very back of the consciousness.

She took a deep breath and dug up the courage needed. "But does that apply to how you feel about me?" She stared deep into his eyes. They had been together for four rough moons now- hardly ever separated. They'd done stupid and dangerous things- and glorious things that no cat would ever know of. Was it possible he truly didn't see her as a friend but just a tool to help his Clan?

His blue eyes were clearer than water and more luminous than stars as he stared down into her asking gaze. "Yes," his mew was firm and final. But the guilty feeling grew.

Chapter 46: Night Combat

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The day of the battle was peaceful in its silence. Scorch noted the stillness of air and the whisper of her breath. The pines stood regally with their coats of green free of snow for the first time in moons. The air had warmed just enough to melt the slush from the trees. But the sun hid behind clouds and kept the ground from warming up- her paws living wide pawprints in the soft snow.

"You can almost taste the suspense in the air," Boulderpaw grumbled as they returned from a hunting trip, each with two pieces of prey.

"Yeah," Scorch agreed, mumbling around her mouthful of prey. "But I imagine that we only notice it because we know what's going to happen. A cat that is just looking forward to a normal day will see this peace as relaxing," she mewed.

Boulderpaw shook his head, "Of course you would say something like that."

Scorch purred. At least Boulderpaw seemed to have gotten over her actions as of late. Though he still wasn't willing to condone her decision, and she was sensible enough not to need that. He had accepted it as her decision to make and forgiven her for it in his own way and they would move on.

Besides, she could feel the excitement rippling under his fur. Even though his pelt was smooth, gaze steady, steps firm; He was still bursting with emotion about the coming battle. *It makes sense, he's finally going to be able to help his Clan. Any cat would be gleeful at the prospect.*

But she also sensed the doubt, the confusion, and anxiety. He would fight,and he would fight harder, but he didn't know what would happen after that and he didn't seem to be optimistic about it.

She laid her tail over his shoulders for a moment. "You'll get to go home at last," she purred.

He looked at her, his blue eyes disconcerted for a moment. "What about you? Will you go home?" She honestly couldn't tell if he was happy or sad about the idea.

Scorch shrugged, looking away as confusion spiked at her paws. "I'll stick around for a while, I think. Mira is going to have her kits soon too. But maybe after that I'll search for home again. It's what I was trying to do before I found the Clans," Scorch mewed.

"I bet your family misses you," Boulderpaw mewed sympathetically. For once, he sounded genuinely sorry for her.

She dipped her head, embarrassed. "I hope they don't miss me too badly. They probably think I'm dead, after all." She dropped her voice to a whisper, "I wouldn't wish this longing on any cat." The very thought of her parents sent thrums of pain dancing through her heart so that it physically hurt to think of them.

"What?" Boulderpaw asked, evidently had not caught the last part.

"Nothing," Scorch shook her head and flashed him a smile around her mice. "Let's talk about how great it'll be when we beat Pinefur once and for all!" Boulderpaw nodded, light shining in his eyes as he contemplated the coming victory.

Scorch sighed in relief as he began talking about what he would do when they won. "The first thing I'll do is run through ThunderClan's territory. I haven't been able to run freely through it for moons... Then I'll eat and talk with my Clan-mates all night long. Then I'll..."

Scorch purred as he chatted on, dropping his prey multiple times in his ecstasy so that they had to pause for him to pick them back up and took longer getting to camp then they should have. She looked at his blue eyes, shining brighter than ever before and his voice elevated in anticipated joy. *I would do nearly anything to keep that look on his face forever*. But forever can sometimes last only a moment.

When they returned to camp, Scorch was surprised to see every cat murmuring together in low voices. Her fur prickled along her spine as she saw the scant prey-pile. Wasn't any other cat preparing themselves for the battle?

They dropped their prey with the rest of the fresh-kill and looked around nervously. Scorch spotted Storm and Mira sitting together with Newtlight watching Fling and Swish nearby. Bouldrpaw followed her, blue eyes round and innocent as he transitioned from gleefulness into cold reality.

"What's going on?" Scorch asked as she approached the two she-cats.

Mira looked at her, a worried frown on her face. "Flickertail said that he received an omen from StarClan," the rogue mewed with a slight snort. "He's been talking with Crowstar and Sunstar for a long time now."

"But why isn't any cat getting ready for the battle?" Boulderpaw pressed, standing beside her with distress pricking at his whiskers.

Storm shook her head, "It seems they don't believe there will be a battle today," the black she-cat mewed. "Apparently the omen was not a good one."

Scorch hissed in frustration. They had to fight today! ThunderClan and WindClan were going to fight, they couldn't leave them to their demise! "What was the omen?" Scorch asked.

Mira shrugged and so did Storm. But Newtlight came over, the kits pouncing on her twitching tail-tip. "The sunrise this morning, did you see it?" The queen's wide yellow eyes were round and worried.

Scorch instantly knew what she was talking about. She'd awaken just before they sun had risen and had watched the morning's sunrise from the glade not far from camp where Boulderpaw had hidden himself not more than four days before. The sky had been fiery red- no orange or yellow or blue or gray- just brilliant red. Satin purple-gray clouds had dotted it and Scorch had thought it beautiful.

Thinking back, the red had been the very shade of blood. But sunrises were sometimes red, just like sunsets. Was it really an omen or just a coincidence? "So we're going to abandon the other Clans over this?" Scorch asked.

Boulderpaw bristled, "No way! We told them we would come, so we have to!"

Mira shrugged, "I don't think they can call off the battle. But I think they can do a good job of stopping our participation in it."

"That's what I'm worried about," Scorch mewed, looking up at the sky. It was still gray, but a few patches in the cover allowed her to glimpse the sun. She noticed a round halo shimmering around her. She stared at the sun halo and was suddenly thrust back to when she was a kit, barley able to stand.

She had sat on the warm sand, leaning against her mother's blue-gray fur and feeling for the first time the salty spray on her face as she waves crashed onto shore right in front of her. Her mother had been watching the sky, her eyes narrowed and unreadable. *"What are you looking at, momma?"*

"The sun, darling. Do you see the halo surrounding the sun?" Scorch had looked up at the sun, it blinded her so that she couldn't see a thing. *"It's a sign that it will rain later,"* her mother had told her.

"Then it must always be there, since it always rains," Scorch had pouted, pushing her tiny muzzle into the comfort of her mother's fur and already anticipating the rumble of thunder upon her ears. And her mother had laughed, a sweet melodious laugh that had warmed her despite her fear.

"Is the thing to do," Storm's voice snapped her back to the present and she scolded herself for getting lost in memories. Especially when the return to reality from the warm place hit her like the first time she'd lost it. She could still hear her mother's lovely laugh in her ears. It overwhelmed her with homesickness that she could only overcome by pushing it away. She couldn't think about that now, the present needed her more than the past.

The cats had quieted and turned to waiting in silence. They only had to wait a little while for the two leaders- black and gold- to appear from the den with Flickertail slipping into the crowd from behind them.

Scorch waited, anticipation churning in her belly with anxiety. Cats were likely to listen to their leader, if they still supported the battle the cats would still give it their full support. But if they changed their mind... That could very well be disastrous.

They didn't need to call the cats together as they scrambled up the tree. Every cat was already there, watching with caught breath in their throats. Scorch wriggled on her paws. Sunstar, she was sure, would have tried to take this chance the minimize the amount of cats to volunteer. But she had hope that Crowstar would stand strong.

And it was the black leader that spoke first. "Friends, the message that Flickertail received from StarClan is not- as feared- a message of destruction. Rather, a message of hope."

The sigh of the Clan cats was felt as one. Scorch gave a small smile of relief which she shared with Boulderpaw. But she saw Sunstar's gaze was still solemn. "The message also warned us, though. And it was not clear. Caution must be exercised by all cats," the RiverClan leader warned.

The relieved feeling dissipated, but hope still vibrated strongly. Scorch was sure that this wouldn't be enough to stop cats from fighting. Crowstar nodded his head, "In the battle tonight, I will participate. ShadowClan must play its part in freeing the Clans from oppression."

ShadowClan yowled their approval but RiverClan stayed silent, looking up at their leader. Willowwater stood up at the bottom of the roots of the tree and looked up with narrowed eyes. "Sunstar, will you participate?"

The yellow leader looked down and met the narrowed gaze steadily, "No."

Scorch felt a ripple of surprise go through her. Leaders were always supposed to be the first one to join a fight- that was one of the reasons StarClan gave them nine live, or so she'd been told. The fact that even a leader with lives to spare wasn't willing to fight could have a drastic impact on his cats. *I thought he'd discourage his cats from fighting, but I would have thought for sure he would help the ones that did go!*

She looked around. The RiverClan cats were glancing around and murmuring in low voices. Surprise and confusion rippled through the crowd. Crowstar jumped down from the tree. "We need to decide now who stays and who will fight. Cats who stay, go over to Sunstar; cats who will fight, come over to me."

Scorch shared a glance with Boulderpaw and the two of them sprinted over to Crowstar, standing beside the tall black leader. He purred gently and gave them an approving nod. Thistlebranch joined them and Shadowripple. But Frogfoot joined Newtlight on Sunstar's side. After all, he was the father of her unborn kits. Scorch couldn't blame him for not wanting to risk his life. He'd lost enough already.

For the RiverClan cats, the senior warriors Creekshade and Webclaw joined their leader. But Willowwater and Flashpaw defiantly joined Crowstar. Now only the rogues remained.

Storm and Mira and the kits went over to Sunstar's side and Scorch wasn't surprised when Jump joined them. She was pleased and surprised to see Painted and Raven join her. She purred at the spotted she-cat to show her gratitude. Now they had a decent patrol and not every cat had chosen yet.

Sunstar's rogues took longer to decide and Scorch watched Sky and her brother, Parsely, join Sunstar along with Hawk. A tom named Sharp and a she-cat named Natalie also joined Sunstar. But the she-cat Regin and the two toms Mullen and Stoat joined Crowstar. Completing an almost perfectly divided Clan.

Scorch was satisfied. They had enough cats to carry out the battle plans and she was confident in their success. Crowstar nodded, "The medicine-cats will remain here and Sunstar's group will protect the

queens and kits in camp while we fight to eliminate the last terror from the lake."

The cats nodded together, accepting the order with set faces and noble gazes. Scorch felt empowered by their instantaneously set resolve. This was a unit of cats, ready and prepared to move and fight as ordered on a moments notice. Warriors were truly of an incredible and rare breed.

But Scorch was not one of them.

She was not skillful, she could not carry out orders, she had not the tie to loyalty that they did, and she was never fighting for anything but her friends. But it didn't bother her. It was noble enough for her and these warriors had accepted her- with all her weaknesses- to be counted among them.

"Dusk is approaching, we will eat and then leave. Make sure you are ready and that you remember the plan," Crowstar ordered them.

Scorch nodded and went with Boulderpaw to the scanty fresh-kill pile. The cats staying behind were being organized by the deputies to go out hunting, but she still took only a miniscule mouse- her belly too churned up to eat well.

But Boulderpaw ate two whole mice, gulping them down and licking his lips as she picked at her meal in the shadow of the apprentices den. "At least the decisions been made. There's no turning back now. Pinefur will be defeated," she mewed, but she was starting to feel a worm of doubt. It all seemed so... uncoordinated.

"Yeah, once we meet up with the other Clans, Pinefur won't know what hit him," Boulderpaw purred, his tail flicking excitedly behind him at the prospect of dethroning the ruler.

"But it will be dangerous," Scorch murmured softly.

Boulderpaw nodded, "Yes, but we have the upperpaw. The element of surprise and greater numbers."

"Only if we manage to meet up with the other Clans," Scorch

pointed out sharply.

"We already have that planned. They'll meet us just after dark not far from the camp near the clearing with the holes," Boulderpaw mewed. "And the WindClan part has a meeting spot too."

"But what if they don't show? Or what if we're discovered by Pinefur's cats?" All the worries Scorch had turned over in her mind now suddenly seemed very probable.

"If they don't show, then we send a cat to check what's going on and decide from there. We've worked it out so that we won't get caught by Pinefur's cats," Boulderpaw assured her. "Besides, why are you worrying so much? You're the one that loves taking risks."

"I like taking chances," Scorch corrected. "That doesn't mean unnecessary risks that can destroy everything we've done so far."

Boulderpaw purred softly, "And here I though you hadn't any common sense in your body." Seeing her expression remain worried, he leaned forward and touched her ear gently. "Stop worrying so much. We'll be just fine. You'll see."

Scorch sighed and tried to relax in his comforting gaze, how odd it was for him to be encouraging her! But her tail remained prickled until Crowstar called them together, the dusky light shadowing the dens and cats gray across the ground. "We will leave now, and we will return victorious!" Crowstar's enthusiastic yowl was answered with cheers and cries of send-off from the cats staying behind.

Scorch hadn't the heart to join in, though Boulderpaw seemed to yowl the loudest of them all at her shoulder. They filed out of camp in an orderly manner and traveled through the pines in perfect silence but with an air of anticipation for the taste of battle.

Scorch's nervousness continued growing, however. And as her paws became slick she wondered if it was from sweat or the slush covering the snow. "The air seems heavy," she murmured to Boulderpaw.

The tom nodded eagerly, "I think that the thaw is finally coming.

Just in time."

But Scorch was alarmed, was it going to rain? She glanced at the sky, streaked with the remnants of orange and purple from sunset. The clouds were thinning overhead, but they were building on the horizon. Thick masses of gray clouds billowed upon each other unlike anything she'd seen the entire cold season. But she had lived by the ocean and knew storm clouds when she saw them.

Crowstar halted just before they got to the border and turned to the cats. "As in the plan, we will wait until dark to enter ThunderClan territory. But here we split up," he nodded at Raven. "You know that plan, right?"

The black she-cat nodded and drew away with her group of cats. They would go to assist the WindClan cats. Raven was followed by Willowwater, Shadowripple, Stoat, and Painted. The spotted she-cat gave her a worried look as she remained with Crowstar's patrol but she didn't say anything as the cats turned away.

Scorch felt a sudden compulsion to say something to Painted; some sort of wish of luck. But by the time she'd drawn her breath Painted was already gone. Just the hint of her cream fur weaving among the trees.

"She'll be fine," Boulderpaw mumbled as he saw her looking after her.

Scorch nodded, confused for a moment as she frowned. What was with her? She'd never been this nervous before a fight before. Was it because last time there was a battle she'd nearly died? *But this is completely different! Pinefur isn't intent on killing me!*

The gloaming light of twilight settled upon the forest and the last calls of birds hushed to a silence as they nested for the night. Crowstar stood up, his black fur just a shade darker than the night that enveloped them. "Let's go. And make sure you keep perfect silence. Boulderpaw, you lead us to the rendezvous point."

The gray apprentice left Scorch's side and she shivered as cold air filled the empty place beside her. But she stayed obediently silent as

they quietly entered the forest. The darkness was haunting as they traversed deeper into the forest. The sun had evidently been met with more luck melting the snow on the unblocked forest floor than in the pine forest since it was slick and wet with patches of bare mud on the trails.

Scorch gasped as she tripped over a fern plant, her paws cracking the stems loudly. She cringed as the shadows around her paused to check for detection, then continued on with a hiss at her to be more careful.

Eventually the undergrowth cleared a little as they neared the camp. But Scorch's heartbeat skyrocketed. In the back of her mind she could see dark shadows squirming, growls echoing, rain hissing, screeches of pain and misery... It almost sounded like her own. *Of course it's your own!* She scolded herself, she was the one imagining it after all.

"Here we are," Boulderpaw's whisper made it through the ranks and Scorch looked around. In the shadowed darkness of night she couldn't recognize the clearing that was covered in moss. But she knew the scent well enough and knew that here they would wait for ThunderClan.

The cats around her shifted impatiently and the mournful creak of the wind through the trees did not lighten the mood. Scorch could feel the trembling in the air, the rain crystals vibrating across the tension. But the tension didn't come from the warriors, they held their heads high and their dark gazes cut through the gloom with noble ferociousness.

The tension, rather, came from the forest itself. Not a leaf stirred and no prey made so much as a squeak. But she could feel it in the ground beneath her paws, the steady thrumming as the world accumulated to itself the necessary elements of a storm.

"Are you okay?" She tore her gaze from her paws and looked up into Boulderpaw's clear gaze. His blue eyes were worried and she realized she was panting and trembling.

"I-" the air was stolen from her chest as she saw images flash

through her mind. A long line of dark cats pacing grimly forward, leaving broken and bleeding cats behind them. *Moonpaw!* Her mind fixed on the dark gray apprentice lying helpless on the floor of the ThunderClan camp with blood trickling from her unhooked jaw. And the steady marching of the cats thumped louder and louder...

Even as Scorch's attention flickered back to Boulderpaw and her breath was released she could hear the marching continuing in her thumping heartbeat. What she was seeing wasn't her imagination. It was the immediate past- a torn and shredded image that leaked into the ground and raced into her.

"We need to get out of here now!" she mewed quickly, standing up and looking around wildly. She could still hear the marching, a pounding pain against her head. But it was fading as the sound traveled through the ground to her paws.

Crowstar's head jerked up, "ThunderClan hasn't arrived," he mewed.

Scorch's fur prickled along her spine and she nosed Boulderpaw out of her way. "And they won't show up! Pinefur... I think he must have known, he is on his way here now!" The thumping tingled against her trembling paws.

Worried murmurs broke up among the warriors, but Crowstar narrowed his eyes, "How could you possibly know?" he didn't sound accusing or angry, however, he seemed unlikely to believe her. And there wasn't time for that, Scorch kneaded the muddy ground anxiously.

Boulderpaw came up to her side and looked at Crowstar, "I know it seems impossible, but Scorch has a way of knowing things like that. I think we should move, if just to regather our information." Scorch felt a glow of warmth for her friend as he supported her though she could feel his impatience at the delay of the battle.

Crowstar nodded, "Okay, let's g-"

"Mullen!" Thistlebranch's shrill scream made every cat jump. But Scorch knew what she would see before she looked. The thumping has stopped.

And Pinefur stood, dark and awful with the helpless brown tom trapped under his paws- his muzzle stuffed in the dirty snow to muffle his shouts. The tyrannical leader turned his green eyes over the small group of cats- his lip curling in disdain.

"Did you think," he started in a scornful yowl, "That it would be so easy to steal my kingdom away from me?!" Cats appeared from the shadow behind him, a long line of grim-eyed and sharp-clawed cats. "Kill them," Pinefur flicked his tail and Scorch felt dread rise in her at an alarming state. They couldn't hope to win against this outrageous number of cats!

"Run!" she yowled, turning on her paws away from the screeching cats.

"Retreat!" Crowstar's order echoed hers.

"Not without Mullen!" shouted Thistlebranch. Scorch saw the tortoiseshell she-cat whisk past her. She skidded on her paws and looked behind her with a gasp as the deputy seemed to dance through the throngs of cats leaping to claw her. The deputy reached Pinefur and with two sharp jabs had forced the leader off Mullen.

"Come on!" Boulderpaw's screech rang in her ears and she saw him at her side. "Move now!" he ordered and Scorch could see Pinefur's cats right at their tails.
"What about Thistlebranch?" she tried to spot the she-cat with Mullen as fear pounded her chest and dried her mouth. The two cats had disappeared in the swarm of cats crashing down upon them.

"She can take care of her herself. Now run!" Boulderpaw urged her on to a different trail, one that was wide and barren. Plenty of filtered starlight lit the gray path that was clear of snow. "This used to be a twoleg path, but now it's the fastest way to get through the territory," Boulderpaw huffed.

Scorch nodded, panting too hard to answer. She could see Regin and Flashpaw running ahead of them, their pelts shone silver but quickly turned to black as the gathering clouds blocked out the last bit of light. "Where's Crowstar?" she asked.

"He went back for Thistlebranch and Mullen," Boulderpaw answered, glancing over his shoulder. "They don't seem to be pursuing us."

Scorch skidded to a stop, "What if they got the others?! We have to go back!" She turned around but Boulderpaw flashed in front of her in a moment. She glared at him fiercely but he didn't blink, "We can't just run away while they fight!" She insisted.

"They chose to go back, and Crowstar ordered us forward! Trust them to make the right decisions for themselves," Boulderpaw growled. "Now go on! If we linger it'll be easier for them to find our scent."

He pushed against her chest and she stumbled backward, her paws slipping on the slick stone and she just caught herself from falling. With a small growl, she spun away, using her fear and anger to propel her forward until she was right behind the two she-cats.

"This way!" Boulderpaw had caught up and reared off the track, leaping over a short stone wall as if he had sprouted wings.

Scorch stared for a moment, but then followed. Pausing at the base of the rock wall to judge the height in the dark and then leaping to the top of the ledge. She looked down, a snow-scattered clearing with a path broken through it led to a rotten and ghastly looking twoleg nest that gaped its open wounds to the night shadows.

"We'll stay here and wait. It's easy to defend and easy to spot any cat sneaking up," Boulderpaw mewed as she leaped down into the garden with Regin and Flashpaw on her tail.

Scorch nodded, "I'll stay on the wall and watch from here while you guys figure out what to do." She wanted to be the first to spot their Clan-mates.

Uneasiness wormed it's way back into her belly as she jumped up on the cold stone again. The attack had already become a failure! They hadn't even managed to meet up with the other cats. Were Raven and Painted having so much trouble? If Pinefur was here maybe they had been able to get away with it... But she couldn't

hold back doubt.

She sighed as she felt a raindrop plop onto her nose. She looked up, squinting her eyes as more rain fell from the heavens. The raindrops were large, erupting upon impact to soak her fur, but there were few of them and the patter against the snow did little to obstruct her sense of hearing or her view.

Scorch crouched on the wall, hearing Boulderpaw's mew echo behind her. They must be sheltering inside. But she didn't mind getting wet in solitude. She needed to be alone right now- if only to collect herself and allow a moment of self-pity.

There! After what felt like half the night, she saw a shadow emerge from the trees, limping slowly toward the wall. Scorch leaped down eagerly, tasting her Clan-mates scent on her muzzle.

She raced toward the shadow, seeing that it was Mullen. She purred at the tall brown tom and his yellow eyes blinked at her in relief. "I was afraid you were one Pinefur's cats," he murmured.

"She's far too small to be in that cat's entourage!" Scorch's heart leaped with joy at Thistlebranch's teasing purr. Crowstar stood behind Mullen, supporting his trembling deputy with his shoulder.

Scorch's eyes scanned over the pelts of the three cats with medical accuracy. Mullen was missing a clump of fur from his shoulder and his back was crisscrossed with scores of scratches, but all of them had already stopped bleeding- signaling that they weren't deep. Crowstar seemed almost untouched, just a small nick on his ear that was crusted with blood.

Thistlebranch though, her chest had two long cuts still bleeding and she held a paw off the ground though Scorch couldn't see any wounds on it. Scorch also saw a long scratch, though not deep, running down her technicolor flank and sucked in a breath.

"Bring her to the den, I'll treat her there," Scorch mewed quickly. She had only leaped down into the clearing for a moment, but any cat could have smelled the thick scent of herbs that grew there.

She watched anxiously as Regin came out and helped Crowstar get Thistlebranch over the wall. Boulderpaw and Flashpaw raced to pluck some moss to make a nest and Scorch sniffed among the plants for some new growth. She managed to find Horsetail, comfrey, and even some marigold. Gathering some cobwebs, she quickly trotted back to the injured deputy.

"Really, I'm alright," Thistlebranch assured her big-eyed Clanmates as she sat on the hastily constructed nest, leaning against the back of the wooden den. Scorch waved them away and started chewing the horsetail and little bit of marigold into a pulp, spitting it out and rubbing it on the two wounds on her chest and then the leftover over on the scratch. She quickly bound them with cobwebs so that they wouldn't start bleeding again. Then she looked at Thistlebranch's front left paw which remained lifted off the ground.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, nosing it. It pulsed with heat and even in the dim light she could see it was swollen.

"I think I twisted it," Thistlebranch hissed as Scorch nosed it gently.

"So that's a 'yes' to the pain," Scorch guessed. Taking the comfrey, she gingerly wrapped it up and then glanced at the cringing deputy. "I think it got pulled out of place when you twisted it. The joint doesn't fit right. I'm going to straighten it so just hold yourself steady. It will hurt."

Thistlebranch let out a strangled scream as Scorch snapped the paw into place. It only took half a second and it was fixed. The deputy let out a long breath, "That already feels much better, thank you." the tortoiseshell slowly moved her paw and tested it against the ground.

"It'll be sore for a while and you shouldn't try to do much than walk anytime soon," Scorch let out a long breath and glanced up as Bouldrpaw laid his tail over her shoulders.

"Good job. But we need to figure out what to do. Dawn will be here soon and we don't know what's going on. Pinefur is still looking for us, we heard the cats not long ago. We need to leave and regroup," Boulderpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded, "Somebody help her," she nodded at Thistlebranch as she got to her paws. Regin let to the deputy lean on her and Scorch quickly used up the last bit of herbs on Mullen and Crowstar.

"Let's go," Crowstar ordered. He led them out of the den and over the stone wall, following a track that led to the ShadowClan border.

"Aren't we going to see what's happened in ThunderClan?" Boulderpaw asked.

Crowstar nodded, his ears gray in the light before dawn. "We will. But we need to get Thistlebranch home and find out what happened with Raven and her cats first."

Scorch looked up, "Which is why going to ThunderClan is the fastest way to do that! We need to know what happened as soon as possible."

Crowstar looked back at her, "What are you suggesting?"

Scorch took a deep breath and looked at Boulderpaw for support, he nodded slowly. "I think that Boulderpaw and I should go see what happened and then meet you back at the ShadowClan border, near the clearing," she mewed.

Crowstar's ears flattened but he thought for a few moments before answering. "If that is what you want to do. It will save us time," he admitted. His amber eyes showed hesitation that transferred into resolve. "Alright, but don't make me regret trusting this to you."

Scorch dipped her head, "I won't, I promise."

She and Boulderpaw turned away from the group and raced back into the forest. The dim gray light turned everything the same shade of gray and ferns just beginning to unfurl and bramble thickets appeared out of the shadows right on top of them as they sped past.

Morning mist trailed their paws and masked the sound of their paws hitting the ground and the few falling raindrops dissipated into the mist. A rotten log blocked their path and Boulderpaw

surged forward, clearing it in one bound. But Scorch had to pause and judge the distance, leaping to the top and then down again, darting off after Boulderpaw's tail as it whisked out of sight.

"Shh!" Boulderpaw hissed into her ear as she caught up, stopping her and dragging her off the path, ducking low to the ground.

Scorch crouched beside him and looked around nervously, ears twitching. Had he seen something? She didn't smell anything but wet leaves and mud, but she was fully aware that the undergrowth that hid them so well could just as easily hide an enemy cat.

"We're almost at camp," Boulderpaw whispered, stalking around a barrier. Scorch pricked her ears in surprise, they had approached from a different direction and she hadn't noticed them pass the hill that led to the entrance. "We can get in through the dirt-place and find out what's happening from there," he mewed.

Scorch flicked her ears, following him to a foul smelling part in the barrier. She knew that this was the only part of camp that wasn't up against a rise besides the entrance, but she eyed it warily, memories flashing in her mind. If she had learned anything from being captured by Nightwing, it was that it was a tremendously terrible idea to walk into your enemy's lair. "Do we really need to go into camp?" she asked nervously.

Boulderpaw nodded impatiently, "I'll go in alone if I have to," he mewed, starting to wriggle through a tiny tear at the base of the barrier. He disappeared beyond the barrier and Scorch's heart lurched. Before she had time to think, she was though the barrier and Boulderpaw was pressing her against the thorny gorse barrier. She curled her lip against the awful stench of the place, but at least they wouldn't need to worry about being scented.

Boulderpaw crept along the barrier, stopping as he peered out into the camp, his tail bushed to twice its usual size. Scorch's pelt rippled nervously and she slipped in beside Boulderpaw and peeked out into the camp. She gasped as images from before flooded back with the ThunderClan cats in shambles.

It seemed every ThunderClan cat was bleeding as they were kept

under silent and solemn guard and huddled miserably together for warmth in the middle of camp as the freezing mist coated them. She glanced besides her and she saw Boulderpaw's horrified gaze fixated on a dark gray she-cat with empty eyes who was leaning heavily on a black spotted golden she-cat. *Moonpaw*.

Scorch could scarcely recognize the rebellious she-cat. Her fur was torn off and her muzzle dripped with blood in a puddle below. Blood trickled out of her mouth and she stared at nothing, countless scars crisscrossed her pelt and Scorch's heart was wrung with pity- she seemed to be hurt the worst. *Did they find out she was behind this?* Scorch felt a trill of terror and she exchanged a horrible glance with Boulderpaw.

"We have to help them!" she hissed.

Boulderpaw nodded, a frown trembling on his face. "I know, but how?"

"Are you Scorch and Boulderpaw by chance?" Scorch jumped in her skin, terrified as she whirled around. Boulderpaw did too, claws out and a growl rumbling in his throat. "Hush!" the voice rebuked them, "They'll hear you."

Scorch looked around, "Where are you?" she didn't see a thing in the dim light and the scent of the dirt-place blocked out everything else.

"Gorsepaw?" Boulderpaw whispered, as if recognizing the voice slowly.

"I'm over here," the voice whispered and Scorch turned her gaze and she spotted two slow blinking brown eyes. His golden-brown pelt blended in exactly with the dried gorse behind him! Boulderpaw rushed to the young cat's side and Scorch was sure that she had met this cat before.

"What happened?" Boulderpaw demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Gorsepaw shook his head with a sigh and Scorch noticed he had several scratches. "Are you hurt?" she moved forward and sniffed

him anxiously but she sighed in relief as she saw they were all shallow and he wasn't seriously injured.

"What happened? Why didn't you meet up with us before fighting?" Scorch whispered.

"We tried. We left in small groups just before dark, but Pinefur was waiting for us. He must have found out and we were outnumbered two to one," Gorsepaw mewed.

Scorch frowned, they had arrived just after dark, "Shouldn't the battle have lasted longer?" she mewed

"No, half the cats just gave up when they knew it was hopeless... I- I did too," the apprentice muttered.

Boulderpaw scowled but Scorch nudged him compassionately, "It must have been overwhelming. But we need to know, were any cats killed?" she stared into the apprentices eyes and he shook his head.

"There are no kits and elders left and me and my sister are the youngest in the Clans and we can hunt and all. But Pinefur said he would punish us after he'd dealt with you, di-did you make it out okay?" Gorsepaw stuttered.

Scorch nodded, "Half of us got injured, but we escaped and are coming back to help. Don't worry, we won't let him hurt you. Where is Pinefur?" Scorch nervously looked out into the clearing.

Gorsepaw dropped his gaze and Boulderpaw nudged him impatiently. "This is no time for guilt!" the older apprentice snapped, "You need to tell us so that we can help. Please, I want to help my Clan," Boulderpaw's voice cracked and Scorch felt a shock as a pulse of helpless guilt swam from Boulderpaw.

"He went to deal with WindClan first after he chased you off. He was angry that he hadn't heard anything about the attack on WindClan... I think he might kill some of them," Gorsepaw's fur prickled in fear.

Scorch's tail bushed up and she shared a glance with Boulderpaw. If Pinefur was marching on WindClan with a vengeance, what would

happen to Raven's patrol? Fear darkened their gazes and Scorch turned to the apprentice. "Stay safe, we'll be back soon." Leaping out of the camp, she disappeared into the mist of morning with Boulderpaw right beside her.

Chapter 47: Sùton

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Scorch darted around dripping tussocks of grass, shivering as they dampened her pelt when she brushed past them. Her paws thrummed in rhythm with Boulderpaw and the two raced through the bramble and fern filled forest toward the WindClan border.

Scorch leaped over a ditch with a shallow leaf-filled streamrunning through it and recognized it as the WindClan border. Boulderpaw thumped onto the ground behind her and sped past her, tail streaming and gray paws a blur in the early morning light.

Fog coated the moor heavily, shadowing the damp gorse and heather against the sky. The peat beneath her paws was soft and squishy, nearly all the snow already melted except for a few piles where it had drifted against the hills.

"We need to be careful," Boulderpaw hissed.

Scorch nodded, but ran faster over the moor. Her heart beat heavily in the eerily silent hills and she felt hope slowly dying. If there was a battle, there would be noise enough to wake the dead. "Do you think they made it out okay?" she whimpered, pausing to regather where she was.

Boulderpaw didn't look at her. "I thought I smelled them, but we won't know until we check out the camp. We can just hope they made it to the ShadowClan border okay. If we're lucky, they managed to meet up with WindClan and defeat Pinefur's troops before he sent reinforcements," he purred optimistically.

"I know... but Pinefur is supposed to be here. He would have fought and I don't think it would have been an easy fight. We should have heard them by now," she worried, peering into the gloom. The gray blanket of cloud blocked her vision and she shivered, feeling suddenly very alone on the huge moor.

Boulderpaw touched her gently with his tail, "We won't know until we see for ourselves," he looked at her, his gaze calm and steady. Scorch felt a rush of gratitude toward him, he was comforting her even after seeing his Clanmates bruised and beaten, awaiting judgment from a cruel leader. She couldn't have stood to leave her family if that had been them. "Now," he continued, "Let's get moving. We need to hurry and meet Crowstar at the border."

He took the lead into the moor and Scorch paused, nose twitching as she caught a familiar scent. She flashed a glance at Boulderpaw, "I can smell Painted!" Joy and relief surged beneath her pelt as she bounded forward with Boulderpaw following her reluctantly.

"We need to get to the camp first," he mewed uncertainly.

She looked back at him, confused, "We should meet up with our patrol fir-" She stopped mid sentence as another scent hit her. Strong and metallic, it bathed her muzzle with it's hideous and mouth-watering taste. Blood. A lot of it- the scent was heavy in the moist air.

Scorch could feel herself trembling before she even processed the smell and red completely engulfed her vision as she imagined her Clanmates lying- drowning- in their own blood. "We need to hurry," she mewed huskily and Boulderpaw pressed against her, steadying her trembles by running his tail softly down her spine comfortingly.

Scorch stopped- heart at her paws- as they turned to look down a steep slope. Blood mixed with dirt and water to run in little streams down the ravaged slope, pooling in the niches that the tumbled down rocks had created as they got stuck on the slope. *The traps we set.*

Scorch's heart twisted, but she breathed a sigh of relief. There had definitely been a battle, but who had won? It was abandoned now- no warriors or corpses- just the lingering trace of fear and anguish that tried to form mirages with the fog.

Beside her, Boulderpaw scanned the slope and hollow slowly, eyes searching. Scorch started with fear as his eyes widened in horror and his fur bushed up to twice its normal size. He looked at her and

she saw fear glittering in the blue depths, "Let's leave, right now. We need to know what happened," he mewed desperately.

Scorch trembled and turned her gaze back to where Boulderpaw had been looking. Why would he want her to leave so immediately if not...? Shock nearly knocked her off her paws and blackness swamped her vision. She tumbled down the steep slope, blood roaring in her ears. She didn't even feel the cuts and scrapes her pelt suffered.

Sliding into a pool of blood and water, she splashed through it behind a larger rock where just a white tipped cream tail stuck out, limp and sodden in the soggy weather. Scorch gasped in breath and suddenly didn't want to take another step forward. She didn't need to see, she really didn't.

Her paws kept moving though, her mind thirsted for the confirmation. Who was lying, all so silent, behind this rock when the battlefield had been left in peace for so long already? Scorch stood just in front of the rock, her eyes fixed blankly on the tail. She could smell the scent, she could see the fur. But she didn't understand, why was she lying there?

"Scorch?" Boulderpaw gently whispered in her ear.

Scorch turned to look at him, smiling lightly at the deeply concerned look on his face- the slight frown, the round eyes, the earnest position of his ears. "It's okay, she's just playing. No way Painted would leave without a goodbye." Why was she crying? The hot tears overfilled and ran down her cheeks, leaving a dark stain on her fur. Her smile trembled, her laugh sobbed, and her paws shook so that she wondered if the earth itself was rumbling.

"Scorch, it's okay. We can leave and go see Crowstar now," Boulderpaw whispered. "We can fix this without you while you mourn-"

"I'm not mourning!" a shrill screech of anger pealed from her lips as something unearthly. She shoved Boulderpaw back and lashed her tail, emotions churning in her so fiercely she couldn't feel anything but hot anger fueled by confusion.

She turned and leaped to the other side of the gray rock, fiercely determined to prove Boulderpaw- and all her thoughts- wrong. But there was nothing to prove him wrong with. There was no body, just the mangled stub of a tail.

Boulderpaw came around, his eyes widening in surprise. Scorch looked at him, her heart beating heavily with relief. "We have to find her! This would be a bad wound, we need to help her!" Scorch sniffed, tears still trickling from her eyes as she turned to search for signs of Painted's path. The rain had washed most of the blood down the steep slope but dimpled paw prints with red-brown mud led the way up the rain-soaked moorland.

Scorch plunged upward, hissing as the mud slipped her backwards so that it seemed for every step she took forward she slid backwards two. "Why is it so slippery?" she hissed, teeth chattering.

"The slope is bare," Boulderpaw huffed beside her, "With no grass or roots of any sort to keep the ground in, it just falls away. In any case, it was the perfect spot for an ambush."

Scorch ignored him, he still sounded on edge and she knew he didn't really think the cats had been victorious. *But Painted's not dead!* Relief surged through her at the revelation and she bounded up with new strength as joy swept away the dark and confusing bundle of thoughts. Even if they had been defeated, with no corpses they were probably all alive. And if they were alive, there was hope.

Scorch bounded across the moor- the sky seemed to have come down to them with thick, wet fog clinging tightly to the land. She couldn't even see the lake even though she could hear the distant lap of water in the stillness.

"This way!" Boulderpaw rushed past her, following a trail of scarlet stains on the yellow ground. Scorch followed him, determination to help Painted giving speed to her paws as she trailed Boulderpaw easily.

"There!" Boulderpaw's gasp came as they rushed up a short slope. At the top, a crumpled shape was moving feebly- just a shadow in the

fog.

"Painted!" Scorch cried as the scent touched her senses. She surged past Boulderpaw, fear pulsing hot beneath her paws. She could smell a sour scent clinging to her friend's pelt and the cream fur was drenched deep scarlet from her wounds.

Painted lay on her belly, her forepaws stretched out before her and her claws hooked into the wet grass as if she'd been keeping herself from slipping backwards down the muddy slope. Her back legs trembled with exhaustion and there was an awful stump where her tail should have been- the wound was still bleeding.

"Oh... oh," Scorch gasped as she hurriedly pressed her paws over the wound, feeling fear tighten her chest as warm blood oozed out at an alarming rate. Painted's eyelids flickered open for a moment before closing and she sighed as Boulderpaw arrived.

"Boulderpaw!" Scorch snapped, assessing Painted's pelt that seemed to have been shredded into ribbons, "I need lots and lots of cobwebs!"

"No," Painted coughed out the word, chocking as she breathed.

Scorch jumped away from her position and quickly rolled Painted on her back, massaging the she-cat's bleeding chest as if the she-cat were drowning. Tears and misery flowed from her as she saw how horrible the pain was for her friend. *She must be in agony*.

"Get cobwebs And poppy seeds!" Scorch snapped again as Boulderpaw just stood there, looking sick.

"It won't help!" Painted coughed again, coughing up blood that splattered on her muzzle.

"It has to! I thought you were dead, but now you're alive! You have to stay alive now!" Scorch begged, desperately pulling wet grass to cover the dark red areas. There was hardly any cream colored fur left and Scorch was aghast. What monster would do this?

"Scorch," Painted mewed gently, her voice tight with barely controlled pain. Her emerald green eyes flickered open, blinking

away the blood that dripped down from a wound on her forehead. "It's okay."

"No, it's not! Why would you say that?!" Scorch demanded, jumping to her paws. "You can't leave me here alone!"

"Scorch, you're not alone anymore. You were when I found you, but that's changed. You have my sisters, and Jump, and Boulderpaw," Painted's gaze flickered toward the silent gray tom, "And all the Clans. It'll be just fine."

"Why are you worried about me? You need to stay alive for yourself!" Scorch cried, "You have to see Mira's kits, you have to enjoy the sun, and the richness of the warm seasons again. You have to see the ocean again and feel the sand warm beneath your paws even when the stars are out!"

Painted sighed, eyes sliding closed, "I couldn't stand a day of that. I've never wanted a thing for myself since the day I lost everything. I just wanted death, and I though that one day I could walk into the ocean and never come out. But I never could make myself do it, and I hated myself for it. Scorch..." Painted looked her fiercely in the eye.

"When I left to take you back to your parents. I swore that would be the last thing I ever did. But I couldn't even manage to do that. Now I'll die for the cats that stole everything for me. But it is okay, because of you, I remembered for a few moments what it felt like to be alive and to care for another cat again and all that I want is to be laid to peace in the earth and to join my family."

Scorch sniffed violently, tears streaming as she sucked in her sobs. Boulderpaw pressed beside her but she only felt coldness where there should have been warmth. "It's all my fault," she sobbed, blindly pressing more grass onto Painted's wounds as the she-cat's breaths grew shallower and shallower. "If I'd never dragged you to the Clans, this never would have happened," she sobbed, "I'm so sorry, Painted!" she cried, pressing her face and muffling her sobs in Painted's blood-stained fur.

She waited for the reconciliation, but it never came. The last breath

faded from Painted's flanks as Scorch cried into her fur. She grasped desperately at Painted's warmth and scent before death masked those warm memories.

"Come on, Scorch," Boulderpaw nudged her gently.

"No!" Scorch screeched as he tried to pull her away. She whipped around to face him, fury racing through her at the solemn look in his eyes, did he feel no grief? She lashed out with her claws across his cheeks and turned back to Painted, ignoring his stunned look. She crouched over her friend, placing her trembling paws on her flanks. "Come on, just breathe," she begged, "Just one more breath, for me?"

The tears had long soaked her fur, but they came down and washed the blood off Painted's hollow flanks as Scorch sobbed into the cold fur. *This can't be happening, it's all just a big dumb joke that I'll laugh at someday.*

.....

Scorch awoke with a chill deep within her damp pelt. Blinking open her sticky eyes, she narrowed them against the hiss of light rain. *Where am I?* Her cheeks felt flaming hot but she shivered despite of herself, her paws and legs ice-cold.

She sat up slowly, her stiff muscles groaning in protest. Taking a deep breath, a faintly unpleasant scent washed over her and startled her to her paws. Memories pounded her head like a merciless headache and she looked down at the limp shape of Painted, waiting for grief to come over her in hot waves.

But it only came as a haunting chill, like the drizzle that lashed across her face- misting her fur and beading on her whiskers. The sky had darkened, thick black clouds mounting upon each other in the distance but the rain stayed light, the wind whipping it across the moor in torn apart strips.

Scorch licked her lips, tasting blood from Painted's fur dried onto her muzzle and she glanced back down at the she-cat. Painted's fur was stiff but the rain had washed off most of the blood- the scent of

death clung to her despite the rain though. Her eyes were closed and a peaceful look was her face, perhaps not peaceful, but complacent.

It haunted Scorch. The satisfaction of death. She felt it too- a chilling silence that venerated throughout every fallen raindrop and dried grass tip. Scorch looked around the empty hills feeling very small and very alone. What should she do? Where should she go? Boulderpaw had gone, probably to meet up with Crowstar and give him the news.

Scorch looked again at the corpse and her paws felt stiff. She should bury her friend, but how could she? First, she didn't know if it was physically possible for her to dig a hole and cover it up with her lack of strength. And that was without considering the mental side.

All she really wanted was to be far, far away from this nightmare. To escape it all for forever. She dug her claws into the ground and swayed. No matter how badly she wanted to, she just couldn't. None of this had been for herself and Painted had always been against it.

Now Painted was dead. Now there was nothing to lose, so why not accomplish something? Why not finish it and leave with at least one good memory? Or at least a memory? Then she could leave and look for her parents and forget all about this. No one would miss her and they'd all part ways as former friends. Even Mira and Jump-

Mira and Jump... Scorch shied away from having to tell them what had happened. She hoped Raven already knew and could tell them. *Speaking of Raven...* Scorch started wandering aimlessly through the rain- searching halfheartedly for the missing patrol. Perhaps Boulderpaw had already found them. Perhaps all that awaited out there was Pinefur's cats and she was walking to her death. Not that it mattered anymore. She felt hollow-hearted and empty-bellied. If she died, she wouldn't have any more worries or sadness.

Scorch still was wary at the prospect of dying, though. Her paws stumbled over tussocks of grass and heather. She kept moving for the sake of doing something to distract her. Finally she came to a halt at the top of a hill. Below her a little hollow was sheltered in

the belly of the surrounding hills and gorse created a fine barricade around it. Rocks leaned against the hills, creating natural dens. *If this isn't WindClan's camp, I'm a mouse.*

She ducked down the slope to the gorse barrier, hoping she hadn't been seen. Luckily, the rain had grown heavier and all the cats seemed to he sheltering. Her thoughts vaguely flickered back to the ThunderClan cats. Had, while she'd been grieving, Pinefur returned and exacted his revenge?

But the sun didn't seem to have reached it's highest point yet- or perhaps it was just past it- so she had hope that she hadn't actually spent too much passed out in grief. She raised her paws, numbly registering that they still trembled, and pressed them into the gorse. Carefully creating a small hole for her to peer through.

The clearing of the camp was abandoned. But she could hear the faint moaning and a couple splashes of blood betrayed the presence of wounded cats. She scanned for guards and spotted a yellow and brown she-cat and an olive brown tom pacing the perimeters of the clearing.

She frowned, her mind unconsciously working on how to get her to the den where the cats seemed to be without being seen by the guards. She wished Boulderpaw were here, his gray pelt would blend into the rain much better than her red and black fur.

Scorch started moving slowly around so that she was right next to the den. She'd have to be quick and dart into the camp and into the den while the guards weren't looking her way. Luckily for her, there was a small gap in the gorse that she could crawl under.

Hiding beneath the gorse, she looked down the short slope and waited for the guards to be positioned so that they weren't looking her way and quickly wriggled the rest of the way through. Placing her paws as lightly as she could while maintaining balance on the muddy grass, she whisked down the slope and sloshed into the rock den in a few heartbeats.

Holding her breath to make sure the guards hadn't heard her, she pressed against the rough rock that created the den and looked at

the cats huddled around her. Wet fur and blood lingered in the thick air. No cat seemed to have noticed her, but she noticed a long-legged black she-cat with amber eyes crouching against the opposite wall of the den. Raven.

Scorch pushed through the torpid cats. They lifted their heads and looked at her with dull eyes as she slipped past. The WindClan warriors seemed even more lifeless than the ThunderClan cats. Fear gripped her mind, black and cold, as she saw Painted's corpse again in her mind.

She shook the image away, but it clung to her morbid mind as she watched the shadows fearfully. Scorch paused beside Raven, her breath short and shallow. The black she-cat had been resting with her eyes half-closed in the dark light and Scorch nudged her, feeling a stain of blood press onto her nose. The black she-cat had suffered injuries as well.

"Raven," she mewed hoarsely, her voice low and rough from dryness after crying so much. She doubted she'd ever be able to shed another tear.

The black she-cat didn't stir and Scorch repeated her name a few times, nosing her. Finally, Raven stirred to wakefulness and her amber eyes opened wide- but they were hollow and reflected the emptiness Scorch felt throughout her body.

"Scorch?" Raven turned to look at her confusedly, fear glimmering in the amber depths for a few moments.

"I'm here," Scorch whispered.

Raven heaved herself to her paws with an effort, "What are you doing here? It's dangerous."

"I know," Scorch answered numbly. "We need to get every cat out of here," her mind refused to work and it turned itself into a knot. "But I don't know how."

Raven looked around helplessly and shook herself vigorously. "Cavepath," the she-cat summoned. A dark brown tom with smoky

gray streaks in his fur stood up and padded over to them. A long scar stretched across his flanks and wounds scuffed his pelt, but he didn't seem terribly injured; his green eyes gleamed with anger and grief.

"Where's Flightfrost?" Scorch asked suddenly, realizing she couldn't see the dark brown tabby tom that had been their faithful helper.

Cavepath looked down at her, eyes confused but gentle. "Pinefur killed him after he captured us. He was going to kill Featherpaw if the one behind the attack didn't step forward. Flightfrost would never let that happen and so he took responsibility for both attacks," Cavepath mewed, his voice cracking with grief.

Scorch waited for a wave of sorrow but only guilt weighed heavily on her. She'd been the one to ask this of Flightfrost, she'd promised herself she wouldn't let any cat die, and now she couldn't even grieve him. She looked up at the roof of the den, *am I so empty that I can't feel anything?*

The barren feeling reminded her of when she'd been stuck visiting the place of Time, but this felt more real. There would be no escaping it. *But I can't think of that now*. She could worry about herself later, right now she just needed to help these cats and make sure Painted didn't die for nothing.

"Where is Pinefur now?" Scorch asked, her thoughts finally working slowly.

"He went back to ThunderClan to punish them. I don't think he believed that Flightfrost was alone in organizing the ThunderClan attack," Raven mewed.

Scorch nodded slowly, "I wish I knew where Boulderpaw went," she lamented aloud.

Raven's fur spiked, "You came here alone?! What happened with ThunderClan?!"

Scorch looked at her, it seemed a lifetime ago that she'd been racing through the dark among the shadowy trees. "We were ambushed,

but we made it out. ThunderClan had been defeated before we even got there. Boulderpaw and I came to see what had happened to your patrol and then..."

"Then what?" Raven asked, her eyes wide with fear.

Scorch shook her head, she didn't know if Raven knew Painted was dead and she couldn't bear to think about it right now. "We got separated and I came here. I think he went back to meet up with Crowstar, but I'm not sure. Anyways, how many guards are there here, could we fight them off?"

Raven and Cavepath shook there heads, "Pinefur did take quite a few cats back to ThunderClan, but most of the cats he left are uninjured. We couldn't hope to beat them," Raven mewed.

Scorch frowned and plucked at the grass. How could she get these cats to safety and still help ThunderClan before Pinefur murdered again? *Think!* She closed her eyes and raced through the corridors of her memory. Her eyes snapped open. She wasn't in the den anymore, instead, she was standing in the dark along a damp stone path. All around her shadows loomed and the air whistled sharp and cold. She was in a tunnel.

She moved forward slowly, the ridges in the stone chipping on her paws. A resonant sound beckoned her onward and she emerged into a cavern with a hole in the roof, letting in misty gray light that shone on a silky black river as it ran swiftly beside the tunnels. *An underground tunnel?*

A sound clinked behind her and she whirled around, but she was back in the den. Raven and Cavepath were staring at her and she didn't meet their gazes. What was that? She knew she had used her powers- she'd recgonized the feeling- but she'd never been transported to another place before. Had some-cat assisted her? Or were her powers growing as Time had warned, and she was subconsciously using them? *Or are they using me?*

She shivered and turned to Cavepath, if she'd been transported to a place in the near past, perhaps he knew of it. "Cavepath, do you know of tunnels around here?"

Cavepath's green eyes flashed with alarm and Raven looked at him curiously. "I do, actually. There are undergrown tunnels that run between WindClan and ThunderClan. The entrance is pretty near our camp." He mewed uncomfortably.

"Could you navigate us safely through them?" Scorch asked.

Cavepath shifted his paws, "Yes, but, I've been warned that they flood when it rains really hard. Plus, then we'd be in ThunderClan territory where Pinefur is and he knows where all the entrances are."

"That's okay," Scorch stared pacing. "If we can get every cat into those tunnels- and it's hardly drizzling- then you'd be safe from Pinefur's rogues. If you go slowly, by the time you reach ThunderClan we'll have Pinefur driven out and you won't be here for him to lash out upon." *This might actually work!*

"But I thought you said that ThunderClan was defeated," Raven mewed.

Scorch waved her tail, "I've got a plan, I'll just have to be quick about it." She hesitated. All eyes were on her as every cat listened, "I'm not going to be able to go with you. Is every cat fit to be moved?" she looked around.

Cavepath quickly checked and nodded, "Yes, if we help the more injured we can make it."

Scorch nodded, a surge of determination rescuing her from her grief. "Alright, I'm going to make a distraction for the cats in camp while you go. I'll meet you at one of the entrances, which one do you want to go to?" Scorch asked.

Cavepath's tail quivered, "There's an entrance under a fern bush near the clearing with the Skyoak," he mewed.

"Skyoak?" Scorch frowned, "Nevermind, I'll find it." Scorch turned, "I'll see you in a bit, good luck," she mewed. She snuck a glance out the den and saw that the guards had been reduced to one. *Perfect.*

She easily slipped back out of the barrier where she had come in.

Turning her paws upward as she scurried up the slope. Spinning around, she raced around the hill to the opposite side of where the cats were trapped, blinking against the rain that stung her gaze.

Scorch skidded to a stop on the slippery grass. Looking down over the camp, she drew in a breath. She released a tremendous yowl, a cry that seethed with rage and trembled her insides. *There's no way they could have missed that.* She backed into a heather bush and lashed her tail, sending them shivering wildly.

Cats began to appear into the clearing of the camp and Scorch released another yowl- one that was clearly an attacking call. The cats swarmed like tiny ants beneath her but they soon were organized and heaved upward- answering her with their own battle cry.

Scorch turned to leave, letting them run themselves ragged as they looked for the attacking 'cats'. But she paused, her heart beating wildly. They would probably kill her if she stayed. And it would be so easy to stay. And then her troubles would be over and she would never have to make a hard decision again or suffer alone again.

But fear grew in her as she heard their ferocious shrieks and she tore away over the rain-soaked moor. She looked over her shoulder and saw Pinefur's cats tearing the heather patch to shreds. Her whiskers twitched, they were plenty distracted and she was sure the cats would be able to escape safely.

Scorch sprinted toward ThunderClan territory, crossing the rolling hills with light paw-steps. Feeling the wind flow through her as she dug her paws in harder and faster. The sun gleamed a peek from between the clouds, showering her with it's gentle golden warmth.

But she could still feel the rain, lashing and drenching, blinding the sun's warmth. And the lightness in her paws did little to mask the emptiness in her chest that added to the heaviness that haunted her gaze.

Chapter 48: Solidarity

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Scorch's paws skidded out from underneath her as she slipped down the short, slush-covered slope. Her breath was knocked from her chest as she hit the slimy earth with her paws splayed about her like a belly-flopped frog. She quickly pushed herself back to her paws and used her dirty paw to try and swipe the mud from her chest, smearing it instead. Scorch put her paw back to the ground, watching it tremble.

The black and red cat looked around. She was near the ShadowClan border now, her uninterrupted dash from the WindClan camp had taken her here swiftly. But for now, ThunderClan trees loomed all around her and the prickly undergrowth pressed in around her.

Taking a bound over a small fallen log, she could distantly see the clearing that interrupted the ThunderClan and ShadowClan border. Scorch had been told that it was an area much disputed over by the two Clans. To her, it seemed an awful lot of trouble over a patch of useless territory.

But it benefited her since it was a good land mark and was where Crowstar had said he'd meet her and Boulderpaw. *I wonder if Boulderpaw already met up with him*. She couldn't muster much concern for her friend, her heart was still numb from the shock and pain.

It was a slap in her face just thinking of Painted's torn and bloody body. *I led her to that;* guilt is a haunting menace. She shook herself, the WindClan cats were surely in the tunnels by now and they needed her to have ThunderClan's territory secure by the time they came out. She wouldn't allow any more lives to be lost today.

The fine drizzle clumped her fur as she ducked into the clearing, the sky gray and tumultuous. Shivering, she paused in the middle of the yellow-grassed clearing and looked up at the sky. The static in the

air set her fur bristling and she prayed that there wouldn't be a thunderstorm. That was the last thing she needed.

Trembling, she continued to cross the clearing, relaxing as she entered the pines. The silence seemed to echo to the emptiness in her heart and the dirt-spotted snow reminded her of Painted's pelt. *Stay focused!* She darted along the familiar paths, drawing deep breaths to search for nearby Clan cats.

There! Scorch skidded around a wall of pines and spotted Crowstar, Flashpaw, Regin, even Mullen was there, his scratches swabbed with fresh cobwebs. She felt herself give a sigh of relief when she saw Boulderpaw's tired shoulders slumped among them.

Scorch froze, what would she say to them? What could she tell them? Heart in her mouth, she called out and they turned as one to stare at her. "Scorch!" Boulderpaw cried in relief and Flashpaw purred, rushing forward to touch noses with her.

"I'm so glad you're okay! Boulderpaw said that he lost you on WindClan territory and we feared the worst!" the black apprentice frantically searched her over for signs of injury. But all the blood on her pelt had come from Painted and the few scuffs from tumbling down hills blended in nicely with her rumpled fur.

Scorch dipped her head, embarrassed. But her heart twinged; Boulderpaw had left her, he hadn't lost her. Was he trying to hurt her even more? She tried to catch his gaze, but he avoided it, staring at his paws instead. She felt hollowness settle all over her again.

She turned to Crowstar, "We need to leave right away for ThunderClan," she mewed, carefully keeping the grief from her voice.

The black leader's eyes widened, his pelt rippling with surprise. "There's nothing we can do now," he mewed, "ThunderClan was defeated, Boulderpaw told me."

Scorch unsheathed and sheathed her claws, staring in tired frustration at the ground, "Yes, but the situation has changed. Our

patrol that was sent to WindClan-"

"Was decimated," Crowstar broke in sadly, "Boulderpaw told me there were no survivors."

"Well, Boulderpaw was wrong!" Scorch snapped. "As far as I know, only two cats died. The rest are on their way to ThunderClan territory and we need to have Pinefur driven out before they get there!"

"What?!"Crowstar looked stunned.

"Is that true?" Regin growled, at Boulderpaw. The gray tom look terrified as the former rogue loomed over him, her lips drawn back in a snarl. He glanced at her helplessly, this time she was the one who refused to catch his eye.

"I-I only saw the battlefield and I found out that Pinefur had taken them captive. I thought he would have killed them," the gray apprentice explained himself.

"Then you should have told us that first!" Crowstar's eyes were narrowed to furious slits, "We never would have left a patrol in the paws of that monster!"

Boulderpaw crouched against the ground meekly and Scorch looked away. "If we go help ThunderClan, we'll still outnumber Pinefur's cats. We can drive him for good from ThunderClan and then later exterminate him from WindClan's territory," Scorch pressed. They needed to hurry or they wouldn't make it in time.

Crowstar shared a glance with Regin and then looked at Mullen. "We need to go back to camp and rest first. We've been on our paws since yesterday and we need to eat and talk with the Clan about this," the leader mewed calmly.

"There isn't *time* for that!" Scorch cried.

Crowstar turned his stern gaze on her, "We cannot fight a battle in this condition."

"But then the WindClan cats will show up and be easy pickings for

Pinefur! They'll get caught all over again, And some cat will have to pay with their life," she growled.

"We won't be any help in this condition," Crowstar insisted. "Now come back with us and rest. You look horrible."

"I feel horrible!" Scorch hissed suddenly, a snarl etching onto her lips and her fur becoming more ruffled. "And I couldn't possibly rest!" she added angrily. Spitting, she turned around and raced over the wet snow. Pines flashed their shadow over her as she streaked past them.

This was a disaster! If ShadowClan and RiverClan didn't show up, how could she possibly drive Pinefur from ThunderClan's territory before WindClan got there? *I could meet them at the tunnel and keep them there until the Clans got rid of Pinefur.* But the longer WindClan was in the tunnels, the more chance of their discovery. And Pinefur's cats would have realized their disappearance by then. Plus she didn't know what Pinefur was doing to ThunderClan in the meantime. Was he murdering a cat at this very moment? She felt sick at the thought of Moonpaw's icy eyes glazed over and staring lifelessly our of a mangled body. Would more death be added to her conscience? She wasn't confident that she could take it.

Scorch skidded to a halt as she reached the clearing again. She needed to think. Closing her eyes, all she saw was Painted's body left abandoned behind her. Guilt shot through her. Was her friend's body being picked apart by buzzards right now? Had she no respect for her friend? She shook herself repeatedly, she wouldn't help the Clan by drowning in misery.

She stared down reproachfully at her paws; *One red and one black. One black. Black.* An idea sparked through her. Excitement spiraled through her and sent her tail twitching, it was the perfect plan! She needed a ready and capable battle force. What cats did she know of that were trained killers just sitting around willing to do anything for a meal? Nightwing's former Clan!

She turned her paws away from the lake and raced along the ShadowClan and ThunderClan scent line. She had doubts that the black cats would be as strong as she remembered from their poor

diet. But hungry cats had a strength all in their own. And she was confident that she could convince them to help. *I just hope Amelia isn't there.*

Her brush with the murderess not too long ago had been a painful reminder that malicious cats were still prowling outside and inside the Clans borders. The rogue border came into sight and she crossed it without hesitation. The three-share border was a place she'd often been, so she knew the area extremely well and headed confidently in her chosen direction.

The snow had been turned to slush by the drizzle and mud splattered onto her already mud-crusted fur. Ducking beneath a dripping bush, she nearly ran right into a wall of black fur.

"Hey! Watch where you-" the cat's growl was broken off and Scorch recognized the black tom. Shade, Storm's mate and the father of Fling and Swish. "Scorch!" The tom dropped the puny mouse he'd been carrying and looked at her with wide eyes. "How is Storm? Is she safe? And the kits! Are they alright?!"

He bombarded her with questions and his anxious caring befuddled her grieving mind. "They-they're fine," she stuttered. "The kits are growing nicely and they're always playing. Storm misses you, of course, but she's made friends with the other queens," she assured him.

The tom took a step back and let out a relieved sigh, giving his chest fur a few embarrassed licks but clearly glad to hear his family was doing well. "Thank you, but, I don't suppose you came all the way out here to tell me that, did you?" he asked, gray eyes looking over her warmly at first and then anxiously. "You look awful!" he exclaimed.

Scorch dipped her head, "I've been told before. Could you take me to your camp? It's really important," she mewed, glad that at least one cat would be willing to help her. And if she promised to get him back with his family, she was sure Shade would jump in to help.

Shade regarded her in silence for a moment and then dipped his

head, "If you wish. Most of the cats are there now, but I can't promise that they'll be happy to see you." He picked up his mouse that was now covered in mud and flicked his tail, signaling for her to follow him.

Scorch padded at his paws, recognizing the path as the one she'd taken last time while shadowing the two black cats. The camp looked unchanged as they emerged from the pines, except that this time there was a few pieces of prey in the hole for fresh-kill. The change of weather had already affected the levels of prey in the forest.

But the camp had no cover and rain flowed freely down without any screen. The cats were huddled at the outskirts of the camp, snuggling at the bases of trees together for warmth. Scorch thought they looked like miserable rabbits caught out in the rain.

With a quick glance, she saw that all their poorly made dens were puddled in water. *So they were forced from their nests. They really can't remain together for much longer anyways*. Scorch walked into the middle of the clearing with a nod at Shade, who stayed in the cover of the trees to pick at his mouse.

Scorch lifted her head to the rain, ignoring the drops splattering against her eyes. She could feel the gazes of the cats on her and the sense she perceived was curious wariness. She feared they wouldn't be as willing to help as she'd hoped. "I need your help," she mewed loudly.

A startled murmur rippled around her and told her that wasn't what they had expected to hear. "You are probably familiar with the name Pinefur," she waited for whispers of assent before continuing. "I am trying to help ThunderClan and WindClan drive him out. However, ShadowClan and RiverClan can't come quick enough and Pinefur will be busy murdering innocents before they are ready."

"Why should we help the Clans?!" a cat yowled. Scorch turned and recognized Wing. The small black she-cat looked even more ragged and thin than last time. "They drove us out and turned us into this!" Wing nodded around at the poor conditions around her.

"That was ShadowClan and RiverClan. We are talking about helping ThunderClan and WindClan," Scorch answered her calmly.

"That's right, they haven't done anything for us either! And you were the one who got ShadowClan and RiverClan to turn against us in the first place. If you'd never come to the lake this never would have happened!" Wing hissed, her brown eyes glaring through the rain.

"If you cats hadn't come to the lake, Nightwing and Pinefur both would never have even gotten to a position of power," Scorch reminded her icily. "And as I understand it, Nightwing hated Pinefur, so you would have fought him if he were still alive."

"But then we would have had a reason to fight. Why should we go risk our lives for you? And don't give me any Warrior nonsense," Wing scowled.

"I would never ask you to fight for nothing," Scorch murmured. She jerked her head up firmly, the leaders would just have to go along with her. "Any cat who fights will be allowed to live with the Clans; They will have to work, yes, but they will have food to eat and a safe den to sleep in," Scorch promised.

Mews echoed up around her, happy and optimistic. She had been right, they were willing and ready to do anything for food and a good nest. But Wing scowled again, "You promised something like that to our cats before, but only a few were given it, how can we trust your word now?"

Scorch could feel her emotions churning, she was spending too much time arguing with this stubborn she-cat. "If you all come," she hissed, startling the cats with her sudden change of tone, "They won't have any choice but to agree to it! And with so many cats already dead, I'm sure they can suck up their pride and allow you to live with them for a few moons at least," she mewed through clenched teeth. Her claws dug into the muddy ground and her shoulders shook in withheld tension.

"I'll come," a cat spoke up, stepping forward. Scorch recognized her as the first cat she'd faced moons ago, a small she-cat named Slate.

More cats echoed the promise and they padded forward around her. Scorch was shocked, every cat in the clearing had gathered around her. Only Wing stood on the edge, disconcerted.

"I guess you couldn't be convinced to come," Scorch asked the she-cat.

Wing looked away, but her brown eyes shone with loneliness. "No, I'll come," the she-cat growled. "Just so that I can sleep a night out of the cold. But I'm leaving when it gets warm," Wing declared.

Scorch nodded and twitched her tail, *the Clan cats will probably prefer it that way*. Scorch turned, the cats on her tail. Shade slipped in besides her as they left the clearing, "Do you think," he murmured in her ear, "That I can get into the same Clan as Storm?"

Scorch shrugged, keeping her gaze fixed on the distant trees, "If not, I'm sure they could join you in ThunderClan or WindClan," she answered. Shade purred and curled his tail over his back.

"So you're all marching to the sound of the Clans orders now? How far you've fallen," a voice sneered. Every hair on Scorch's pelt prickled and bloody images flashed in her mind, reminding her aching heart of Painted.

"Amelia," she mewed, pausing and looking up into the bunched branches of a spruce tree. Amelia's black pelt bushed dry and fluffy within the haven of the thick needled branches.

The cats around her stiffened and a few backed away from her. Scorch didn't take her eyes of Amelia and the she-cat did likewise. "I hope you don't mind," Scorch mewed in a voice like flint.

"Of course not, they're not my cats after all. I'd just hoped they had a little more loyalty," the she-cat's scathing amber eyes flitted over the drawn black faces

"I could say the same to you," Scorch sniffed. "You seem to be in a much better condition then your Clan-mates," she added pointedly.

The she-cat scoffed, "They were never on my level." A few cats growled at that, but no one spoke outright.

"We will be leaving now," Scorch mewed, turning her back on the murderess but keeping her ears pricked in case the cat made a move.

"Good luck!" Amelia called after them, "And Scorch, I heard about your dear Painted. Despair is such a bitter taste, isn't it?"

Scorch's heart beat out of her chest, but she forced herself to keep walking at the same, steady pace with her wide gaze fixed on her paws that moved involuntarily. Her breath trembled and her lips curled. How was it even possible for Amelia to have heard about that? Her fur had been dry and she would have had to run from territory to territory as fast as Scorch had.

She peeked nervously over her shoulder, was Amelia a ghost of some sort? "Hey, Scorch, what do you need us to do, exactly?" Shade asked, nudging her from her illusions.

"Oh, yes, of course," Scorch dipped her head apologetically, walking faster through the dripping forest toward the ThunderClan border. "From what I know, the ThunderClan cats are currently being held captive in their own camp where Pinefur is. We need to help them drive out Pinefur before WindClan arrives; whom I helped evacuate from their camp not too long ago," Scorch explained.

"All right, but why are they being held captive?" Wing asked.

Scorch flicked her tail, "We were attempting to revolt against Pinefur but he found out about the plan and we walked right into a trap. Now we need to finish what we began before he does," she growled.

Shade flicked his tail, "If he knows about the plan, does he know about this?" he asked, glancing around as if expecting cats to ambush them from the shadows.

"No," Scorch lifted her head, stepping across the border into ThunderClan territory. "No cat knows about this except us."

"And Amelia," a cat growled, his brown eyes glanced suspiciously over his shoulder.

"Relax, Jet," Soot mewed from beside the ruffled tom. "She may not be friendly, but she wouldn't betray us to *Pinefur,* she hated him as much as her father did."

Scorch nodded, her paw pads prickling as she hoped Soot was right. She signaled for silence and started sliding off the main paths, sliding along the muddy ditches where the rain water flowed down to form murky pools. They followed her silently and swiftly; Scorch was confident they would not disappoint her in battle.

She felt a sudden surge of strength with such a capable group of cats following her commands. For a moment she understood the insatiable thirst for power that must posses Pinefur. But that highness and picture of glory in battle was crushed as her memory cowered with the image of Painted. Would the picture ever cease to haunt her?

"That's the camp, up ahead," she hissed over her shoulder at the cats following her. She could see the brown gorse barrier between the damp trees. "Half of you circle around to the entrance and I'll take the other half in through the back entrance. Enter only after you've heard my signal," Scorch whispered, moving around to the dirtplace entrance. The cats behind her parted like water, they didn't even need a cat to organize them, half followed her and half turned toward the main entrance. *We can do this!*

Her heart pounded, throbbing in her paws as she crept over the cold slimy leaves and slipped through the tear in the dirtplace barrier. The cats followed her quickly and were on her tail as she cautiously prowled through the tunnel on light paws. The wretched smell of the place didn't even bother her this time, she was too focused on what was going on in the clearing.

Crouching low to the ground, she slid into a position where she could look out into the clearing. Silver rain misted the clearing and veiled the figures that milled about. But Scorch spotted Pinefur's copper-brown pelt instantly, his green eyes glaring through the mist as he growled and grumbled. The ThunderClan cats cowered in front of him, trapped between him and the cliff face, the entrance guarded by two solemnly erect figures.

Scorch could see Moonpaw pressed in the middle of the sea of cats. The Clan cats were clearly not going to give the apprentice up to Pinefur's punishment easily. Scorch pressed her belly to the wet ground, eyes flicking around. Guards, lots of guards. They stood on the edge of the clearing in the shelter of dens, watching Pinefur verbally berate the Clan cats into giving up the initiator.

She could see impatience etched into ever muscle in Pinefur's pelt, he'd kill some cat soon if not the right one. *Time to act.* With a quick nod over her shoulder at the cats behind her she stood up, suddenly wondering if she could trust the black cats to go into battle behind her, doubt freezing her for a moment. *They came this far, I'm sure it isn't for nothing.* Shaking the last doubt from her mind, she let out an ear-splitting caterwaul and pounded into the clearing.

The black cats behind her echoed her cry and fanned out behind her, meeting the startled guards with pulled back fangs and unsheathed claws. Chaos erupted as Pinefur's cats who had turned to meet her patrol were jumped on from behind by the other half of the force she had brought, becoming pinned helplessly between the two forces.

Scorch dodged beneath the claws of a bright golden she-cat and sprinted over to the stunned ThunderClan cats. They would need ThunderClan's help to beat Pinefur. "Come on!" she called to them, slipping to a stop in front of them. "If you don't help, we won't win!" she encouraged as the cats got to their paws slowly- paws shaking and eyes shocked.

Hope sparkled as the ginger tom Sunstorm moved to the front, nodding at her before launching into battle. A stream of cats followed him, whisking past her. She heaved a deep breath, exhilarated by the wind they stirred up around her. Only Moonpaw and Gorsepaw remained where ThunderClan had been cowering a few moments before.

Gorsepaw looked at the cats tearing at each other with wide eyes. Moonpaw nudged him gently, her injuries making her wince at the slight movement. Scorch met Moonpaw's gaze proudly. She had promised to help, and now she had.

Moonpaw's ice blue eyes were hazy with gratitude. Scorch had never seen a cat look so grateful, and especially not Moonpaw. The stormy gray apprentice raced into battle with the timid Gorsepaw at her tail. Scorch turned to join them, inspired by their courage, leaping onto the back of a nearby tortoiseshell she-cat who was holding a small black ThunderClan she-cat beneath her and tearing at the victim's fur.

Scorch recognized the helpless cat as Gorsepaw's sister, Ravenpaw, as she bit into the ear of the tortoiseshell rogue. Curling her claws into the ruffled pelt beneath her paws, Scorch felt the tortoiseshell bend her back as she prepared to roll.

Tearing a last pawful of fur from the tortoiseshell's back, Scorch leaped for the ground hitting it with enough force to stun her mismatched paws as the tortoiseshell fell onto her back. Luckily Ravenpaw was already in position and leaped at her opponent's exposed white belly.

Scorch left the apprentice to finish the she-cat. The rage of war rushed in and away from her like a breath she drew in and out. Her heart pulsed, her gaze flashed. Images came and went, like glimmers of moonlight on the rippling lake.

"Scorch!" a warning yowl interrupted her dazed thoughts and she looked up in time to be tackled to the ground by a white tom with gold tabby stripes. Claws tore at her skin as she hit the cold, muddy floor of the hollow. She was rolled onto her back and found her front forepaws pinned to her chest by the tom's wide forepaws.

His rain-soaked fur clung to his rippling muscles and his ears were pinned to his head. A growl echoed from him as he opened his mouth in a snarl, showing his long white fangs. Scorch huffed, her heart fluttering like a trapped bird in her panic.

Heaving at her forepaws, she couldn't budge them and her attempts to roll over or heave him off were futile against his greater weight. The tom's blue eyes glimmered darkly down at her and she saw him bending his neck for her throat. Not again! Panic paralyzed her as she remembered the bursting pain when Nightwing's claws sliced open her throat.

"Not today!" the screech echoed above her head like a crack of thunder. Shaking from her stupor, Scorch saw a flash of gray explode into the tom above her and wrench him to the ground beside her. She rolled away to avoid being crushed by them and- with a gasp of amazement- realized with glee that it was Boulderpaw who had come to her rescue.

He swiped at the tabby's head and ducked for his paws, knocking him onto his side and rolling him onto his back. The tabby tom tried to bite Boulderpaw's paws but the apprentice growled and swiped his claws over the cat's nose. The apprentice finished the fight with a few fierce bites to the shoulders and practically shoved the stumbling tom out of the clearing.

Looking around her, shapes and washed away colors blurred as more and more cats from RiverClan, ThunderClan, and WindClan stampeded into the clearing, overwhelming Pinefur's force. It seemed that only a few moments later Pinefur's cats were cowering and turning tail, desperately pushing through the Clan cats to escape the claws and fangs.

Scorch's gaze lighted upon the last enemy cat to leave; Pinefur. The tyrant lifted himself up to full height and sent a malignant green glare across the clearing that would make even the strongest warrior shiver. "Don't think this is over, fools," he snarled. "This is just beginning and you've already dug your grave." The four Clans didn't even twitch a whisker at the threat. With a flick of his copper-brown tail, Pinefur disappeared into the drizzling woods.

Silence hushed upon the Clan cats. They shared glances of surprise, had they won so easily? It took Scorch only a moment to flash a wide smile and cheers erupted in a roar of victory. The ground seemed to clamor beneath her in excitement and Boulderpaw slipped to her side as she backed away from the jubilation.

"Are you okay?" he whispered anxiously, curling his tail around her neck in a gesture of kindness.

Scorch looked at him, using her paw to flick a bit of blood from his muzzle. "Yeah," she whispered hoarsely, managing a weak smile of assurance. "I don't think I've ever been so happy to see you before."

Boulderpaw purred and nudged her, "Sorry I was late, you had a brilliant plan. We never would have made it

in time if you hadn't rounded up Nightwing's cats," he admitted, ducking his head to avoid her gaze.

Scorch purred, "I'm surprised you managed to get practically every RiverClan and ShadowClan cat to help, and then you also brought WindClan!" she looked around the Clan filled hollow. Familiar faces mingled with new ones and she found that happiness was a picture. It was magnificent to see all four Clans standing together first in battle and now in victory.

Boulderpaw looked back up at her, "We ran into them on the way over. Only a few were fit to come help, but the rest should arrive any moment now," he purred. "And it wasn't difficult to convince so many cats to come from the ShadowClan camp. Once they heard you were out on your own trying to help, they all lined up. Only the queens, Thistlebranch, and Mullen stayed behind."

Scorch pricked her ears, "Sunstar came?" she asked, looking around. With so many cats and the rainy light it was hard to see very well.

"Yes, he's here," Boulderpaw grunted, "He may not be the most involved cat, but even he knows when it's time to put in a commitment," he mewed grudgingly.

Scorch sighed, leaning into his warm fur and realizing how cold and dirty she was. "Sorry," she murmured.

Boulderpaw shifted his paws, "What for?"

"I know every cat is celebrating," she waved her tail at the cats who were still laughing and crying together. "But there's something I need your help with..."

...

"We're here," Scorch mewed, stopping. The wet grass brushed her legs and the wind slapped rain across her face. As night encroached upon the sky again, the rain grew heavier but the breeze that rolled it along was warm and wet, taking the sting from the downpour but

increasing the electrostatic feeling.

Her harrowing gaze stared heavily down upon the sodden lump of fur laying on the ground in front of her. "Do you want to do it back in ThunderClan territory? Pinefur returned to the WindClan camp and we don't want to get caught here."

Scorch shook her head, "I have a different place in mind, but it'll take a while to get there. Help me carry her, please," she mewed in a tight voice. With Boulderpaw she put her shoulder underneath Painted's stiff body. The corpse was cold and hard, drenched with the scent of death. Her friend was cold and Scorch stumbled under the weight but refused to allow Boulderpaw to see her weak condition.

Between them, they set off across the moor, heading for the lake shore. The rain misted off the lake, spraying them in the face. Scorch didn't even twitch an ear at it, her thoughts were as heavy and still as Painted's lifeless body. *But I can do this last service for you, Painted.*

They turned off the shore and headed into ShadowClan's pines, passing very near the camp where the recently returned warriors were imparting good news to the few who had remained behind. But the two passed by without stopping.

Scorch felt a prickle of guilt, perhaps she should have grabbed Raven, Mira, and Jump to help bury Painted. But Mira was heavy with kits while Raven and Jump had both been on their paws quite a bit today. They could see the grave later.

Night descended slowly, sunset turning the light a deeper shade of gray with every passing minute. Scorch trudged through the slushy snow, gaze fixed on the mesmerizing gray. They crossed the border into rogue territory in silence and Scorch was grateful that Boulderpaw didn't try to distract her from her mourning thoughts; he simply allowed her silence to grieve.

Scorch lifted her nose, navigating the half-familiar territory carefully. She hoped she remembered how to get there, as she'd only been there twice and had always approached from a different

direction. But there it was, the little rise that stretched free of the tangled undergrowth and the shadow of the pines.

Veiled moonlight glowed gray on the pale grass and the juniper bush arched as a thick wall against the wind and rain. The little spring pooled gently in the sandy stream, the raindrops sending ripples arching across its snow-melt swelled surface.

"This is a very peaceful place," Boulderpaw mewed gently.

Scorch nodded, letting Painted slide from her shoulders onto the ground. "This is where Painted once lived with her family. I wish I could take her to where her family is buried, but that's too far to travel. This will have to do," she mewed quietly. Walking to the place Painted had showed her the den had once stood, she pushed her paws into the cold ground, pawing and digging at the cold, damp dirt.

Boulderpaw came to her side and together they scrapped a bigger and deeper hole so that Painted would be protected from the elements and predators. Scorch sat back from the hole, panting as rain trickled down her fur. She looked up at the dark sky, blinking as the invisible raindrops splattered into her eyes. "Let's lay her to rest," Boulderpaw encouraged softly.

Scorch nodded, "Okay," she sniffed, hoping it was just rain that was trickling down her cheeks. With Boulderpaw's help, she shifted Painted's body into the hole. The rain pattered off Painted's stiff fur mercilessly and the she-cat was curled as if she were just asleep. No breath stirred her whiskers and Scorch knew that it was wishful thinking that Painted would ever utter a breath again.

Boulderpaw helped her kick the dirt back over Painted's body. Scorch turned, the pile of churned up dirt the only proof that Painted was buried beneath and she patted the dirt gently. "Maybe we should have taken her back to camp for cats to sit vigil," she whispered, staring blankly at the only thing left of Painted.

Boulderpaw pressed against her, "No, not many cats knew her and she wasn't a Clan cat."

"That doesn't mean she deserved any less respect," Scorch murmured miserably.

"No, she didn't," Boulderpaw conceded, his warm breath tickling her ear, "But I think she would have rather been laid to rest without a lot of noise. She seemed like that kind of cat."

Scorch nodded slowly, tears drowning her gaze as her throat tightened with heat. "Yeah."

They sat together, staring at the grave as the rain poured down. "I hope you find your family again," Scorch whispered.

Perhaps it was the rain, perhaps it was her exhaustion, but Scorch could have sworn that she saw in the night mist four cats standing in front of her. Two small cats, a brown tom and a white tom, stood between a tall dark brown tabby tom and an all too familiar cream she-cat with spotted fur and glowing green eyes. *Painted and her family.*

Bittersweet emotion filled her. It evaporated as a flash of searing light outlined her shadow against the juniper bush and was immediately followed by a cascade of thunder. It trembled the ground and she cowered beneath it. Boulderpaw crouched beside her and lapped at her ears soothingly; she stubbornly refused to leave the grave as thunder pealed throughout the night, she would face her fear for Painted's sake.

Scorch stayed there and withstood thunder and lighting, waiting out Painted's last night in solidarity with the spirit of the Clans. But she wasn't afraid to accept Boulderpaw's soothing support during the longest night of her life.

Chapter 49: Abience

Chapter 49: Abience

Scorch awoke, her nose twitching as she noticed the sweet smell wafting just in front of her closed eye-lids. Giving a little grumble, she stretched her ebony green eyes open and blinked against the dauntingly bright sunlight. For a moment, she didn't move. It felt so good, the warmth slowly soaking into her water-clogged fur as she lay upon the fresh grass- the dew just disappearing from the green stalks and leaving them with a sweet scent.

But the source of the delicious scent- a mouse- compelled her to roll from her curled position to her paws and tuck into the meal. As she munched the mouse meat, she looked around, discombobulated by the strange surroundings.

Green pine trees loomed around the glade, spiking up darkly against a clear blue sky. The sun was hazy and hung upon the top throws of the pine trees with no clouds were in sight. A tall, sweet-smelling juniper bush stood protectively behind her and a small spring bubbled peaceful and blue by a mound of damp and freshly churned dirt.

At the sight of it, Scorch could feel the chilly breeze and the shadows that crept from the pines were upon her vision as she stared at the grave. Scorch pushed the half-eaten mouse away from her, it didn't smell so sweet anymore. The mouse blood and bones sickened her.

"Oh! You're awake," a voice called cheerfully. Scorch turned her head slowly as Boulderpaw padded up the sparkling green slope, holding a starling by the wing an he waved his tail happily. She dipped her head slowly in response to his greeting, words sticking in her throat.

Boulderpaw's blue eyes glanced at her half-eaten meal anxiously, "Are you sure you're not hungrier?"

Scorch nodded again, turning to look at the grave. She stared, despondent, while Boulderpaw ate the starling in silence. Her thoughts ran over and over all her memories with Painted.

The meeting when Painted pulled her from the ocean, the travels as she bounced along the sandy shore while Painted snapped at her to quit wasting energy. The sadness in Painted's gaze when they stopped at her family's' graves, the arguments over helping the Clans; emotions of anger, frustration, happiness, silent tensions, and then relief that had sparked between them so often. But Painted had always been there, had always come back for her. Scorch felt little and tremulously vulnerable without Painted's watchful green gaze on her.

"Come on," Boulderpaw shook her from her thoughts, "We need to get back to camp," he mewed, "This place isn't doing you any good."

Scorch felt a flash of anger, "I don't need it to do me any good! I don't want to leave Painted," she hissed, swiping at Boulderpaw with unsheathed claws. He ducked out of range but his blue eyes were no longer gentle, they were sharp as flint.

"You can't sit here and mourn until you're half dead. Pull yourself together. Every cat has to go through sadness at one time or another. Death is a part of life, that's just how it is. Learn to deal with it and move on," Boulderpaw growled, looming over her.

Scorch ignored him and looked away. In her heart, she knew he was right. She had things to do and cats to help. But her fervor was lost in her grief, the reasons why she had fought for so long against the wishes of her friends were lost in her misery, she couldn't even recall the reasons she'd given Painted for helping the Clans. All she wanted was to sit here in peace and be lost in her thoughts.

Tears welled up again as she was pulled between what she wanted and what she knew she had to complete. Blinking, she felt herself whirled away into a torrent of water. Silvery light glimmered above her and rushed besides her as she choked on the water that filled her lungs. The panic and shock paralyzed her.

Splashing above the surface, she saw herself lost in sea of stormy

water with nothing but grayness around her. The salty taste was familiar and so were the choppy waves that swept her up and below in a heartbeat. This was the ocean; the ocean she had once lived beside, the one that had stolen her away from her family and led her into the mess she was now in. But what was she doing in it?

Scorch tumbled down again under the waves, twirling and spinning in the savage current that tore her in every direction. Thrust above the surface, she saw the sky, blue and clear. Yet, not so blue. The color was drained, the sun looked like it was veiled in shadow and the sky as well. *Is this a mirage?* But there were no cats, were there? Blackness enveloped her for a moment and when it faded she was staring at her trembling paws, standing on sold green ground.

But the salty taste remained. Scorch licked her muzzle and tasted tears. Had the salt of her tears invoked such an intense mirage? It was as when she'd been transported to the underground tunnels with no cats there as well, except the ocean was much further away.

Fresh fear danced on her tongue, sweeping away grief for a moment. Scorch jerked her head up at Boulderpaw, he was still staring at her angrily. *I need to see Time*. The old black tom had warned her before of her powers increasing quickly and becoming unstable, was it already happening?

She turned away from the grave and swept past the gray apprentice, trotting down the glade. "Time to go," she mewed. Her heart longed to stay in this quietly mournful place, but she kept her green gaze firmly fixed on the trail of pine needles leading deeper into the forest. She was doing neither what she wanted nor required to do, but what needed to be done.

Boulderpaw didn't question her sudden change of mind, but followed a tail-length behind her in perplexed silence. Birds chirped in the distance, gleeful at the end of the cold season. The snow had melted, only a few clumps of dirty snow laid at the base of trees in the deepest shadows. The breeze rustled the canopy of pine branches against each other but no light made it to the pine floor.

The camp sat soundly in its hollow, an intrigued murmur coming from it. Scorch pricked her ears, was something going on? She

padded past a rotten black log with brown ivy clinging to it and padded trough the thorn tunnel. The cats in the clearing were standing proudly in a circle around Flashpaw. The black she-cat was looking up happily at Sunstar who stood in front of her.

"Flashpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior-code and to protect and defend your Clan even at the cost of your life?"

Flashpaw stared at Sunstar with shining gray eyes that matched the pale cobwebs covering her black pelt. "I do."

Sunstar looked up at the sky, the sunlight pouring down to illuminate the two, "Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Flashpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Flashstrike. StarClan honors your optimism and courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

"Flashstrike! Flashstrike! Flashstrike!" The cats cheered, shouting the new name at the top of their lungs to the sky- the pines seemed to shake from the force of the heralded warrior. Flashstrike looked around the shadowy camp with eyes full of pride. Boulderpaw purred at Scorch's side and pushed past her, heading to congratulate his friend. Scorch watched him, angry at herself for not being able to be happy for her friend, only misty sadness wreathed around her.

All she could see was Mira and Jump standing by the nursery. At this point, they must know Painted was dead, or at least that she was unaccounted for. Scorch felt sick, so sick she almost gagged and had to stare up at the sky to keep herself from doing so.

"It's okay," a warm breath stirred her ear fur. "They already know," Raven's soft voice was achingly reminiscent of Painted's.

"Did you know?" Scorch asked hoarsely.

"Yes, I saw her, she was alive when Pinefur's forces forced us to the camp and left her in the battlefield. But I knew there was nothing to be done for her. And when I saw you in the den, that terribly dead look in your eyes, I knew that she was dead," Raven sighed softly, pressing her side against hers.

Scorch felt tears well up in her eyes again as heat constrained her. Would she cry every day of her life? "Tears aren't like you, I don't think I've ever seen you cry before," Raven hushed her mumbling sobs as the black and red she-cat pressed her face into the sleek black fur.

"I only cry," she blubbered, "When it's over."

"Hush now, it is over. So dry your eyes and start again," Mira's voice now sounded above her, gentle and sympathetic but with a strain of loss that pricked at Scorch's heart guiltily. She couldn't remain there, she was about to crumple up beneath herself from the grief.

The black and red kit tore away from them and headed blindly out of the camp. She couldn't go back. She didn't want comfort and consolation. Couldn't she grieve in peace? Was it wrong to be sad? Was it all so terribly awful? Scorch stopped and looked at the mottled brown ground, it was awful to be alone in grief. She just needed to be around cats that would be able to understand her silence and at the same time not indulge her in it.

"Scorch!" she quickly glanced over her shoulder and saw Boulderpaw racing toward her. She kept walking.

He slowed down at her side and panted heavily, his paws thumping tiredly against the pine covered floor. "What do you want?" Scorch asked after a few moments of silence. Her voice was steady, but she felt as shaky as a leaf.

"Where are you going, Scorch?" Boulderpaw asked, lifting up his head. She avoided his gaze, walking faster in front of him.

"None of your business," she snapped as he hurried after her. Scorch could feel her heart desperately clawing at her chest to be let out but she wouldn't collapse in front of him again.

"It is!" Boulderpaw snapped back, "There are things that need to be settled back at the ThunderClan camp. While Pinefur is still in WindClan's territory, we need to drive him out before he can retaliate."

Scorch felt her fur prickle, it was still so dirty from yesterday. "Why do I have to take care of that? The Clans are full of cats much more experienced than me!" She stopped and turned to face Boulderpaw. "Can't I just be given peace for a moon?" she pleaded.

Boulderpaw stared at her with hard eyes, "Why should you?" he snarled, "No Clan cat got a moon to mope around when our friends and families were killed. The best thing is to keep yourself busy and allow the cats that want to help, help you!"

Scorch turned away, "I would if I could, but I can't," she mewed, her voice scratched in her throat. "I have something else to do now or there will be no help for me," she mewed, moving forward toward the rogue border.

Boulderpaw stopped following her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going away, don't look for me," she shouted.

Scorch hurried, lest Boulderpaw would quit hesitating and chase after her. She ducked through a mushroom patch and climbed carefully over a rotting log. Boulderpaw had been hidden from sight behind her when she heard his call, "I'll be waiting for you in ThunderClan!"

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Dusk was approaching when Scorch paused at the top of a high knoll. She was far beyond the ShadowClan border, not in a place she had ever been to before. She'd felt the need for something entirely new and had found a tall, lonesome hill, barren of anything but crumbling dirt and sparse old grass being penetrated by a few bright new shoots.

The pines encircled the land but the hill rose above the tallest peaks- it was the tallest point of land in the surrounding area with the exception of the hill where the Moonpool dwelled. At the top she could sit, the sun's dying rays on her back, and look out at the forest of shadows. The lake a sparkling silver-blue pool among the cluster of trees.

The tops of the pines were turned crimson in the dusk light. The sky a deep red and mystic purple. But the red reminded her of Painted covered in blood. And that was not all, she was swept from one moment in time to another so suddenly that she couldn't make heads or tails of what was happening. All she was certain of was the terrible taste of blood and the misty red that glazed over her eyes as she sat immobile on the crest of the hill. The shrieks were haunting as well.

"Steady yourself, little one," a rough voice cut through her delusions and when she blinked the only red she saw was the rust in the dirt that she stood upon and her one scarlet paw. Oh, how much loathing Scorch suddenly found for that one red paw- red was suck an ugly color and she now detested it.

"Time?" Scorch was aware of the speaker of the voice, distracting her from her disgust. The black tom stood beside her, his body a cloud of black smoke and shadow.

The tom nodded, his red eyes glowed and Scorch couldn't meet his gaze. "I see you finally came," Time mewed after a moment, circling around her.

"Yes."

"Are you ready for us to train?" He stood behind her, she could feel him staring at her neck but she couldn't turn to meet his gaze.

"I am."

"You're lying," he hissed angrily, opening his black mouth in distaste.

Cold shock bristled through her, "I'm not lying!" she hissed, hotly. After all, he was the one who had asked her to meet him!

"Yes, you are. I asked you to come when you could give me your full attention," Time mewed steadily. "You only came now because you needed a distraction, not because you were willing to focus on this task."

"What's the difference?" Scorch scowled, staring at the ground that

she scraped at like dust with her paw.

"The difference is the focus. You are focused on distracting yourself. Thus, you will work quickly and vigorously. But this is not a menial task I'm going to put you to, this is something you are going to need to envelope into your very soul if you don't want to waste what short time you have," Time's growl sent shivers down her spine.

"Am I going to die soon?" her voice was a tiny squeak, isn't that what was meant by 'short-time?' or did she not have much longer before she went insane? The way her mirages popped up had gotten worse exponentially.

"No," a laughing purr eliminated her worries and for the first time in days she experienced something besides grief. Scorch turned to see Sonya standing beside Time, her white and ginger fur glowing like the moon and sun. "But to Time, every cat's life is short, there's no room for hesitating in life," the she-cat purred.

Her friend's bright green eyes calmed her, they promised safety and warmth. "Sonya..." Scorch felt tears well up again, in the face of such comfort she couldn't silence the emotions surging under her pelt. "Sonya!"

The white and ginger she-cat curled around her comfortingly, Scorch's face safely hidden in the pelt as her shoulders heaved and sobs erupted. Collapsing to the ground, Sonya gently stroked her spine with her paw like a mother would for a troubled kit.

"It's not fair!" Scorch sobbed, "I didn't want Painted to die, I needed her! She did so much for me- a stranger- I wanted to do something for her but all I did- all I did was lead her to her death!" She screamed into Sonya's fur. It was so frustrating and horrible; she'd never even had the chance to thank Painted.

"Calm down now," Time's mew rumbled gently. "You know Painted didn't blame you at all."

"I know," Scorch flattened her ears, "I know that! But I still feel it like a heavy shadow over me. Had I never met her, she wouldn't have died this way."

"But then she wouldn't have been able to *live* this way, Scorch," Sonya murmured in her ear. "Because she met you she got to go on an adventure, she was able to reconcile herself to the Clans' injustice, and make peace with Raven. And now she will live on in your heart as long as you remember her, she will live on in the hearts of all those that met her. Is that not a better fate then just disappearing one day on a soundless shore?"

Scorch sniffed, blinking the tears from her eyes and resting her chin on Sonya's flank as she stared off into the pine tops. "Maybe, but is it the fate she wanted?" She didn't know, for all her time that she'd spent with Painted, she had never been able to penetrate deep into the spotted she-cat's wants and desires.

"Did she say otherwise?" Sonya asked. Scorch shook her head. "Then honor her by showing her that you can live like she wished you to. Show her that you can remain compassionate and gentle in the face of death- show her that you can do what she could not."

What she could not. Scorch knew one thing, Painted had changed after the death of her family and the spotted cat had always silently hated herself for being unable to defeat the grief in her heart. Scorch could not allow herself to tread upon that road of misery.

"Besides, Painted was not a young cat," Time mewed, "Her time in this world was completed, there was nothing more she could gain- I can tell you that much, so don't be too sad for her sake." The black tom stretched. As Scorch had cried and Sonya had comforted her, dusk had come to an end, the last edge of the sun sinking beyond the horizon.

Scorch watched it silently, "Everything has an end, I guess."

"Yes," Time nodded his head, "That is true, everything has an end. But when one cat's life and dreams end, another one begins. Whose to say that this sunset is every cats sunset? It could very well be the dawn to someone else. Just be careful that you don't get lost in the twilight."

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Scorch stumbled over a root of a tree, hissing as it twisted her paw. Black, unbroken shadows blanketed everything and she couldn't make out a single thing in the darkness. The moon's light was sliced by countless tree branches and never quite made it to the forest floor, remaining twisted and bent up above her head.

"We'll meet you back here tomorrow at sun-high. Right now, you need to get some sleep and calm your mind." That was what Time had told her when she'd left the knoll. Scorch just wished she had remembered to ask if they could meet closer to Clan territory, it had taken her half the night to get this far.

And there was a certain Clan she needed to live in for the time being. The scent of damp wood permeated the air and mingled with the pale tinge of new growth. The ground was cold beneath her paws and moist enough to mold her pawprints in the ground. It was soothing to her.

In fact, the whole world seemed soothing; from the silly shadows to the clamorous breeze. Scorch had cried her last tears in the mourning of Painted and now that she was empty, the night comforts found refuge in her hollow heart. She cradled close to her heart the hoot of an owl and the faint flowery scent that wafted around her along the path.

ThunderClan's forest was lovely after the rain and storm. The blackness cloaked her and carried her safely- if not clumsily- toward the camp. With a shock of surprise, Scorch realized that this would be her first time approaching the camp from the main trail. Pleasure glimmered in her chest that she had helped with this change, sorrowed only a little by Painted's sacrifice for that change.

Scorch walked confidently along the leaf-track, the barrier rising up dark before her with a small opening glowing silver from the moonlight beyond. A flash of black overhead caught her attention and she stiffened, her heart bouncing. Was it Amelia? The villainous she-cat had not been abandoned in Scorch's thoughts during the misery of Painted's demise.

But it was only a bat, its waxy wings flapping itself higher and higher, spinning between the tangle of tree branches until it

reached the sky beyond. Scorch sighed and let her shoulders slump as the tension dissipated.

Looking back to the track in front of her, she felt a strong pulse run through her and what little color there was in the black night drained as she entered the world of her mirages.

The trail was the same, or maybe a little more overgrown. It was dark, blacker shadows drowning her vision. A trail of glowing white sticks littered the ground in front of her. They smelled vile and Scorch curled her lips, noticing a faint red staining the strange sticks. Leaning closer in the darkness to get a better look, she gagged as the shape and smell registered that these were not white sticks, they were blood-stained bones. Cat bones.

Did this happen a long time ago? Scorch could not pry her gaze away from the bones, morbid fascination gripping her tightly. A low growl rumbled around her, like a rumble of thunder- thunder filled with malice. A quick glance upward revealed a large black and white creature. A wide snout striped with white swung around in the darkness. Twin berry black eyes glowered at nothing.

Fear ripped a shriek from her and she stumbled backwards, heart beating faster than her paws. She stumbled into a bramble bush and felt the thorns catch on her dirty fur. The badger moved closer, its paws crunching the bones beneath it. Could it see her? Horror spun through her, she only knew cats couldn't see her, could other animals in the mirage world see her?

"Scorch!" a call sliced her panic and in an instant the mirage shattered. There was no badger, no trail of bones, no vile stench. But she was caught in a bramble bush, her flank and back right leg deep in the troublesome bush. She turned her muzzle to try to free herself but only scratched it, unable to reach close enough without tearing her face to shreds.

The cat who had called out to her, Boulderpaw it seemed, was in front of her, two warriors stood behind him. "How did you manage to do that?" one of the warriors, a silver tabby she-cat, asked.

"I, err," Scorch felt embarrassment burn her ears and was glad it

was so dark. "I don't really know," she mewed. It was true, in her alarm she hadn't noticed a thing at all.

"Well, you're caught pretty well. Can you pull yourself out?" Boulderpaw asked. Scorch clenched her teeth and pulled as hard as she could, her front claws gouging deep into the soft ground. She could feel her fur tearing and managed to free her flank, though even now she could see tufts of red and black on the brown thorns.

"There, now one last pull," the silver tabby mewed, ducking down to bite at the tendril that held her leg. Scorch pulled and hopped out of the bramble bush, free as a bird.

"Thanks," she sighed, feeling embarrassed that her entrance to ThunderClan was marked by something as silly as getting caught in a bramble bush.

"No problem," the last warrior- Scorch thought it was Icewhisker- mewed, turning back to the entrance to the camp.

"Um, Boulderpaw, I can go in, right?" Scorch asked, nervously turning to her friend.

"Of course!" the silver tabby mewed, nudging her along. "We've all heard what you've done for us and we aren't the type to turn a little kit out in the forest on her own so late at night." Scorch was prodded into the camp. As expected of such a late hour, it was deserted. But the sky was magnificently silver and black, pale white light glowing on the dirt-hollowed camp and reflecting off the glimmering gray stone that made a wall to protect the camp, minerals in the stone shining like tiny dewdrops. After so many nights in the pine forest, she had almost forgotten what the night sky looked like.

"Come on, you can sleep in the apprentice's den with me," Boulderpaw mewed as the silver tabby and Icewhisker returned to guard duty, which they evidently had been doing before she arrived.

"Thanks," Scorch dipped her head awkwardly. The last time she'd seen Boulderpaw she hadn't been terribly civil, in that haze of grief

and fear she couldn't recall what she had been thinking. And still, she grieved at the thought of Painted, but it was no longer blinding her.

"Did I wake you up?" she wondered as he led her to a bramble screen in front of the cliff, taking her behind it into a cave.

"No," he whispered, "I was still awake. Though your screech probably could have woken the dead,"
he teased.

Scorch huffed, "Did I wake any other cat?" she whispered, aware that there were other cats sleeping in the den.

"Surprisingly, I don't think so. Maybe you did and they just thought it was a mouse or something," Boulderpaw mewed, guiding her to the very back of the moss-floored den. A nest that smelled of him lay there and there was room enough beside it to build another one later.

Scorch curled down by it, grateful for the nice moss floor. "Don't you want to get those thorns out of your fur first?" Boulderpaw asked as she closed her eyes.

"Not really, I want to sleep for now," she mumbled, tucking her nose under her tail.

"Honestly, can you not take care of yourself at all?" Boulderpaw grumbled, but he didn't sound annoyed, instead she got a sweet feeling of relief from him. He was clearly glad that she was taking Painted's death better.

Scorch felt him lapping at her pelt, pulling out the uncomfortably lodged thorns and smoothing out the bunches of matted fur. She purred and felt herself sliding into sleep, grateful that it was with such a soothing and peaceful feeling blanketing her.

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Silence woke her. It rang in her ears, louder than the deafening waves and stiffer than the moon. Not a breath stirred and as she stretched her eyes open she wasn't where she expected to be. There

was no soft moss floor, no Boulderpaw beside her.

She stood on dead grass, warmth filled her but she couldn't feel the golden rays of the sun she knew were on her back. The ground trembled vigorously beneath her and she crouched against it, trying to steady herself. But it was no longer there, it was sliding away and she slid down with it, a silent cry erupting as her mouth was filled with tasteless dirt. Scorch reached upwards desperately toward the round hollow sun that shone in the hole above her head as dirt fell down all around her. She reached up and saw a black and brown paw grasp for it desperately and then darkness caved in, snuffing out the light and the warmth.

Scorch bolted upright in a dim-lit den, her flanks heaving and her tongue lapping at her muzzle. *It was just a dream, just a dream*. But it had seemed so real! Almost like a mirage, but while she was sleeping? Scorch shook her head, she needed to work with Time so that this would stop. She didn't know how many days she could take this, constantly being thrown into another cat's terror.

Lifting up a paw and licking it, she drew it over her ear comfortingly. Scorch glanced at her fur, although ruffled by her thrashing sleep, it was cleaner than it had been for days. A small pile of thorns and mud scraps were tucked in the corner by Boulderpaw's nest. She purred, had he groomed her fur so well for her?

Better not let his work go to waste, with a few quick licks she smoothed her unruly pelt and flicked the pieces of moss from her pelt. Looking around the den, hazy morning light lit the den in a few rays of the deepest golden light- but all the nests were empty.

Her paws pricked, should she have gotten up earlier? Painted would yell at her if- grief turned the thought cold. Never again would Painted reproach her kit-like tendencies. *Or maybe she still does lecture me in the stars and I just can't hear it,* Scorch forced a purr, determined not to let sadness swallow her whole again.

Her ears pricked as throaty and guttural sounds emanated from outside the den. Standing up, she sensed intense turmoil and barely tapped anger. Scorch frowned, hurrying across the moss floor and

out of the den, what was there to be angry about so early in the morning?

Shadows still clung to the edges of the clearing and the sun had yet to clear the tree tops, but the clearing was full of bristling cats. Scorch looked around, wondering if she should get involved. This wasn't the ShadowClan camp, she didn't have the reputation here to be of any authority.

She spotted Boulderpaw standing nearby with Moonpaw, the littermates had equally grim expressions in their eyes as they watched the source of the conflict. *Is that Wing?* Scorch stood on her hind legs to get a better look at the fighting cats.

Sure enough, the small black she-cat was hissing in the face of a familiar looking delicately gray she-cat with lighter features. Wispheart, Scorch recognized the mind behind the genius attack that had led to failure. But what were they arguing about? Scorch couldn't understand anything from the wild insults they hurled at each other, both backed by their friends that gathered around them in support.

Scorch started to creep over toward Boulderpaw. "Scorch!" she flinched at Wing's angry yowl. Cats turned to look at her and she flicked her ears, uneasy under their gazes that were fired up by the fight.

A gap parted so that she had a clear path to Wing and Wispheart; she walked towards them hesitantly. She didn't know what was going on or what to do. And she was still mentally exhausted from the past few days- there was no way she could come up with a magic solution to a horrible problem right now.

"Go on," Wing nodded at her as she paused in front of the two bickering she-cats. "Tell that idiot what you told me," Wing mewed, jerking her head at the ThunderClan warrior.

Wispheart growled, "Watch your tongue, rogue."

"Oh yeah? How about this?" Wing taunted, cuffing Wispheart's ears. The gray she-cat growled again, her eyes flashing and she stepped

out of Wing's reach. Between the two, Scorch estimated that Wispheart was showing the most restraint.

"What is this about?" Scorch asked, unable to keep a sigh out of her voice. It seemed to her completely ridiculous that she was sorting out a fight between two grown cats when they considered her to be the kit. Had they no sense of shame?

"They want us to leave," Wing growled, brown eyes flashing angrily.

"You are welcome to remain for a little while, but you cannot join the Clans!" Wispheart argued.

Scorch flicked her tail and sat down, "I thought you said, Wing, that you would leave when the weather is warmer?"

Wing nodded, "I will."

Wispheart's blue eyes flashed with shock, "Then what are you fighting about?! That's exactly what I offered you!" the she-cat screeched, incredulous.

Wing met the warrior's astounded expression, "*I* will leave, but some of my friends want to stay and join the Clans."

Scorch nodded, "Which ones?" she asked, already guessing.

"Rita, Soot, Jack, and of course, Shade," Wing snorted. *The ones who wanted to join ShadowClan.*

Scorch stood up, flicking her black and red tail and looked at Wispheart. "There are only four cats, can you not take them in?"

Wispheart stepped back, "I don't have the authority," the gray cat murmured, dropping her gaze.

"Well, I say no!" a cat yowled, stomping forward. It was a young ginger tom with glaring green eyes, "They were part of Nightwing's Clan once, and he was just as bad as Pinefur! I don't want murderers in ThunderClan!"

"Flamepaw!" Wispheart snapped, "This is a matter for warriors."

Flamepaw? Scorch stiffened, the cat that had killed Leafpaw. She glanced at Boulderpaw quickly, he had defended his friend firmly against her distrustful feelings, what would he do now? Boulderpaw didn't move, his gaze fixed firmly on the ginger tom.

"That cat isn't a warrior!" Flamepaw argued, flicking his tail at her contemptuously.

Scorch puffed her chest angrily. "Scorch had a intimate part in this, so it is natural for her to be involved," Wispheart argued back and Wing nodded. Flamepaw scowled and slipped back into the crowd, replaced by a larger ginger tom with green eyes.

"Sunstorm," Wispheart dipped her head respectively. Scorch dipped her head quickly, he was the oldest cat in ThunderClan at the moment and thus, most powerful.

The ginger tom surveyed the four black cats, "I think, just this once, because of our low numbers, we can make an exception and allow these cats into the Clans. They have already proven they can be loyal by fighting with us. But it will not be easy," he warned the black cats who were starting to look excited. "You will have to work long and hard to gain the trust and respect of your Clan-mates."

Soot nodded, "We are willing to put everything we have into this." Scorch purred as pelts smoothed around her, that had settled the problem quickly.

Sunstorm nodded, "Then, while we're all here, we may as well have another discussion."

Scorch tensed, weren't they done? The sun was still hanging amidst the trees, the air only beginning to warm. What else could possibly be a problem now?

"We need to decide when WindClan will leave our camp," Sunstorm growled, his green eyes flashing suspiciously at the WindClan cats huddled together by the entrance. They looked nervous and out of place, glancing up at every creak and rustle.

Scorch flicked her ears, "I imagine they will leave as soon as they

can. So, when Pinefur is driven for good from their territory."

"Then I think they ought to get to it," Icewhisker growled, the light gray tom twitched his whiskers disdainfully.

Scorch looked at him, alarmed. "They can't do it by themselves!"

"It's their territory, their problem," Icewhisker shrugged.

Were they all mouse-brained? Scorch lashed her tail, "You have to work together!" she spat.

"Why should we?" Wispheart asked, her blue eyes looking over the WindClan cats indifferently. "Are they simply incapable of doing it themselves?"

Cavepath stepped forward from the WindClan cats, his fur bristling, "We never asked for your help," the tom growled.

What were they bickering about? Scorch couldn't understand it, ShadowClan and RiverClan had worked together much better than this! Was she missing something? She looked around the sea of feline faces, but she couldn't sense anything but common distrust. There was no specific emotion working here expect dislike.

Scorch lashed her tail, "You have to work together, you may even need ShadowClan and RiverClan's help," she snapped.

"No, we can take care of this on our own," Cavepath growled stubbornly.

"Then go ahead!" Sunstorm answered with a lash of his tail.

"If you two mouse-brains can think logically for a moment," Scorch growled through clenched teeth, "Pinefur had enough cats to occupy both of your camps and you didn't kill a single one of his cats in the last fight. So he has the same number as he had when he conquered you. Only with outside help and all your forces were you able to win. Why would that suddenly change?"

Her words silenced every cat and she had that satisfaction. A few moments later, though, she realized it wasn't a thoughtful silence

but a brooding silence. They weren't taking her advice very well. Scorch took a shaky step back, feeling their annoyance directed at her like a large rock looming over her, waiting to fall.

"Thanks," Sunstorm growled curtly, "But we can take care of this matter without your help."

Scorch just dipped her head and slipped shakily back into the crowd, wishing they didn't move away from her. *Did I get too involved? Did I let my tone get accusing or sarcastic?* She agonized over what she did wrong as she approached Boulderpaw. The gray apprentice nudged her encouragingly, but his blue eyes were apathetic- he didn't sense the vexing feelings like she did. He didn't sense the suspicion like she did.

Chapter 50: Descending Despair

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Noise. There was lots of it. Scorch closed her eyes and concentrated hard on the singular circle of peace within the radiating madness. Like a calm pool in the middle of the ocean, waves of emotion and turmoil cascading all around but not stirring even a ripple in her one spot of peace.

"That's it, keep focusing on that peace. Stand strong against the racket of the ages. It's not the least bit interesting anyways," Time's mew sounded behind her and Scorch closed her eyes tighter.

Colors flashed, distracting her. Images too, and the babel of tongues. She drew in one shaky breath after another, carefully remaining in that pool of silence as she was pulled and pushed from one moment in time to the next. Memories flowing in and out of her faster than a whirlwind.

She kept her paws firmly on the ground, even when she couldn't feel it- tumbling up and down, pushed right and left and back again. Scorch remained stiff, carefully ignoring the emotions coursing through her sometimes hotter than fire and other times colder than a mountain breeze.

"Remain focused, you need to keep going," Sonya's soft voice encouraged her. Scorch panted, trembling at the effort of ignoring so much information. It was nearly impossible, even with closed eyes she saw it all in her mind, and it felt like trying to forget a part of her own memory over and over again.

"Now let it drift away from you... like how a thunderstorm leaves on a stiff breeze and leaves the forest washed afresh," Time instructed.

Scorch stiffened at the word thunder, thoughts turning to deafening roars and blinding flashes. And then she was out of the pool of peace and in the sea of storms. She gasped, losing her breath in the memories. A brown cat, a red pelt. A happy face with the eyes closed in bliss and a suspicious face with the muzzle twitching in a snarl. A growl and lashing tail, a purr and the lap of a soft tongue.

Scorch rolled through the memories, her heart beating ever faster at the speed of the mirages. "Scorch, wake up!" The sharp voice cut across it and her eyes popped open as she lost her balance in the storm and fell onto her back.

Sweat dampened her paws and her mind whirled, a pounding in her head that matched the beat of her heart made her wince. "How was that?" she wheezed, glancing to her side where Sonya sat, Time standing besides her.

"Well, you lasted longer than yesterday. But again, you couldn't come out of it consciously," Time mewed, frowning. "You should have managed that by now."

Scorch felt her ears turn hot, "Sorry," she apologized, looking at the sky. It was pale blue like the spotted robin eggs. On the high knoll, not a thing obstructed the view from horizon to horizon and the sun shone down, a little more than three quarters across the sky.

Scorch's gaze trailed to the deeper blue distance as her breathing slowed and the sweat evaporated, leaving her feeling cooler in the new-leaf breeze. Wispy clouds haloed the sky, faint and fine as if dandelion fluff had been swept up into the sky.

"Are you going to get up, or are you going to stare at the sky all day?" Sonya asked, leaning over her so that her eyes stared right into hers.

"In a moment. Look how pretty the sky is," Scorch mewed, nodding up at it.

Sonya looked up, "We've been having nice weather ever since that last storm."

Scorch winced, remembering the long night of the storm when she'd stayed by Painted's grave. With a twinge of guilt she remembered that she needed to go tell Mira, Raven, and Jump where it was so that they could visit it. *I just haven't had time to see them yet, I'll see them soon, I'm sure.*

"Everything is staring to turn green, too," Scorch mewed, sitting up. Even on the bare dirt a few sprigs of grass were poking up out of the dry ground. And in the forest, the trees and ground alike were covered in a green mist as the plants started sprouting their first buds of the season. Even a few early lilies had already opened their curved white petals.

"And the air is so much warmer!" Sonya exclaimed, turning her nose to the wind and breathing it in. Scorch laughed as the she-cat broke off in a cough.

"Are you glad for the pollen too?" Scorch teased.

Sonya purred roughly and nudged her. "I guess I could do without the pollen," the she-cat mewed hoarsely, sniffing and rubbing at her eyes.

Scorch stared at her friend thoughtfully, "I don't know any herbs that help with allergies..." she stared off over the pines. "I could ask Skypool or Willowleaf if they know anything," she offered.

Sonya purred and shook her head, "It's fine. I'll just suffer through the season," the white and ginger she-cat mewed dramatically.

Scorch shook her head, "It would be no trouble, really," she insisted, looking her friend over quickly. Besides wet eyes, Sonya didn't seem to be affected.

Time shook his head, "We didn't come here to bother about allergies. We need to decide what to do about you, Scorch," he flicked his tail at her and she ducked her head. "We've been doing this for five days and you still can't even come out of your powers on your own."

Scorch shuffled her paws, something always distracted her and she

got caught into it. She'd almost come out on her own this time but even that had been extremely difficult. Sonya could do it without trying.

"I'll get it soon," she promised, looking up determinedly into Time's eyes but looking away as the red gaze bored into hers.

"Soon isn't good enough. We need to move on to controlling it better, but we can't work with it until you can come out of it. At this rate it'll take moons for you to be as controlled as Sonya," Time growled.

Scorch lashed her tail, "Well, we have moons to work together. I don't know what the rush is."

Time jerked his head at her, "There is a big rush here. We need to work faster and longer. I want you here at dawn tomorrow or I'll send Sonya after you," he nodded at the she-cat.

Scorch tilted her head to one side, "There's just something I don't understand."

"And that would be?" the black tom inquired.

"The mirages are being triggered by feelings and sensations. But before, it seemed like I would go into the mirage world when I was focusing less on it," Scorch mewed. "Why is it backwards now?"

"It's not," Time sniffed. "You used to go into it more peacefully, now it's more violent so you notice it more. But it used to be triggered when you stopped thinking and started focusing on the world. To you, it felt like you were focusing on nothing in the world but you were really focusing on all the sensation of it."

Scorch nodded slowly, "So now it's just being triggered without me focusing?"

Time nodded, "That is correct. And if we don't work faster your power will grow so that it will begin to be triggered by emotions. And if it gets worse, by your thoughts. That is when the cats start to crazy. Horror breeds horror so all it takes is one negative thought and suddenly you're trapped inside your own nightmares."

Scorch shivered, that sounded awful. What would it be like, if every time she thought of Painted, she saw some cat dying and some cat shrieking in anguish. She probably would go crazy.

"Although you're far from that point," Sonya mewed, scraping at the ground with a claw, "I feel as if you're caught in an uphill struggle, Scorch." Sonya and Time shared a glance and Scorch looked between them, wonderingly.

Time nodded his head, "I felt it too. The more you use your power, the faster it grows. It's probably why it's taking you so long to master something so simple." The black tom frowned and Scorch felt her fur prickle as he started brooding.

"It doesn't often happen," Time mewed, "But sometimes a cat's power grows faster the more it is used so that when you try to learn to control it, you just make it stronger."

"And what would that do?" Scorch asked, stepping toward the black tom.

"Well, it really comes down to a race, then. A race against your own power to see if you can control it before it controls you. You'd have the best chance it you spent every waking moment for the next moon working on controlling your power," Time stared her in the eye.

But Scorch looked back at him in despair. "Don't be ridiculous! I can't spend every waking moment with you. First off, these exercises leave me exhausted after only half a day. And secondly, I have to help the Clans. Pinefur is still on the loose and I have no idea how he's going to respond and no cat is willing to work together and-"

Sonya's fluffy tail filled her mouth and cut off her words. Scorch looked at her friend and allowed her shoulders to relax. Spitting out the ginger and white tail she looked sheepishly at the two cats, "Sorry, but I'm too busy to give so much of my time to this. We'll just have to hope that I can beat it at this pace," she declared.

Time shrugged and Sonya looked at her worriedly. "It's your

choice," the black tom mewed, "But you should know that despair is not a pleasant place to be."

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Scorch hummed softly, trotting gingerly through ThunderClan's forest. Dusk was quickly descending, the sun's rays striped orange through the trees and lighting up the forest floor like a tiger's pelt. Soft grass shoots tickled her paws and she saw the old leaves remaining from last leaf-bare were disintegrating into dirt.

After her session with Time and Sonya, Scorch wasn't feeling better about her powers, however, she was sure enough that she could work through this. *After all, it's not like I have a better choice. I need to at least be here to supervise the Clans, it seems like they get nothing done unless I'm biting at their heals.*

Scorch worried over ThunderClan and WindClan. It was clear they wouldn't be welcome to her taking control of the situation. And she was only barely seven moons now. The Clans wouldn't think a cat as young as her could possibly know the best options. *But I do have the wisdom of the ages, I've observed more than all of them put together could have!*

But did that really make her a better leader? Sure, she'd observed a lot and her plans were often successful. But in the end, it had been Sunstar's plan that beat Nightwing and Boulderpaw bringing ShadowClan and RiverClan that had beat Pinefur out of the forest after the plan she'd helped make had failed.

"Ouch!" she hissed as she tripped over a root, her paw twisting. She stiffened as the pain whirled her into her mirages, a gray cat lay motionless at her paws- the back leg twisted horrendously and cats screaming in panic around her.

As the pain in her paw faded, so did the mirage and she was left with a slightly soberer aura. Who was the gray cat? What had become of it? Questions that she had no desire to answer and that remained unanswered.

She continued forward along the now half-familiar paths through

the trees and bushes, heading steadily for camp. Her stomach grumbled and Scorch wondered if she ought to try to catch something, to show the ThunderClan cats that she could be helpful.

The last few days all she seemed to have done was eat, sleep, and preach- the black and red cat wondered if that was part of the reason the Clan cats didn't like her very much. *But I've been so busy with Time and Sonya- and I did rescue both WindClan and ThunderClan. Five days shouldn't have turned them sour so quickly.*

A yowl rang through the sleepy air and halted her thoughts, she lifted her head, gazing through the green that was permeating the brown. *Is some cat in trouble?* But another one followed and it sounded gleeful. It also sounded familiar, Boulderpaw?

Changing direction, she stepped off the path and brushed through the undergrowth, green fern fronds trailing over her pelt as she ducked between them. Scorch looked down a small slope to a moss covered hollow. She remembered it as the place where they'd first gone to meet up with ThunderClan and had been faced by Pinefur.

Now, four young cats tumbled around the green clearing, chasing each other and swatting at trailing tails like a bunch of kits. Scorch's paws prickled in interest as she watched the apprentices play. Even Boulderpaw was there with Moonpaw, chasing Gorsepaw and his sister around with soft growls and swats. The two WindClan apprentices stood silently off to the side, as if they weren't quite comfortable playing with the ThunderClan cats.

Could she go join them? They seemed to be having such fun, perhaps she shouldn't bother them. Uncertainty raged in her as Moonpaw pounced on Ravenpaw and wrestled the younger apprentice to the ground, flipping and tumbling over the clearing like two fish out of water.

"Are you spying?" Scorch jumped out of her skin and whipped around, sending the ferns around her rustling.

Flamepaw stood behind her, his green eyes narrowed. Scorch shivered, all she sensed from him was coldness; but in the argument five days before, all she'd sensed from him was fire. He strode

forward, forcing her to back down the slope into the moss clearing.

The movement and sound alerted the apprentices and she could feel their gazes turning toward them. Scorch was confounded by Flamepaw's behavior and stopped, planting her paws firmly in the ground. "I wasn't spying," she mewed calmly.

"Then why didn't you greet them?" the ginger tom growled, snaking his head down so that they were eye-to-eye.

"I didn't want to interrupt their game," Scorch mewed, staring at him levelly. She kept her tone neutral, there was no need to defend herself, she was doing nothing wrong and she refused to be bullied.

Flamepaw drew his lips back in the beginnings of a snarl, "I'm getting really tired of you, always acting superior. But all you do is eat prey others catch for you, and sleep in my den."

"It is the apprentices den, not yours," Scorch drooped her gaze at a flash of guilt, it was true that she'd been mooching off the Clan. She needed to participate in the duties like she had while living with ShadowClan and RiverClan. But she spent most of her day with Time, when could she fit in going on patrol?

"You shouldn't tell us how to do things if you're not going to help out," Flamepaw growled, stepping forward and casting her in his shadow. Scorch crouched, starting to tremble; he had a point, but this threatening coldness was frighteningly similar to what she felt when Painted died and it was unnerving her.

"Leave her be, Flamepaw," Boulderpaw mewed, stepping in front of her so that he was in between them.

The ginger tom immediately backed down and dipped his head apologetically. "Of course, sorry for that, Boulderpaw. I was just suggesting that perhaps Scorch could help out more with Clan duties," Flamepaw mewed diplomatically.

Scorch felt miffed, had he been like that from the start she would have been more open for conversation. Boulderpaw turned to look at her as she straightened, "You know," the gray apprentice started,

"You could help out more and make an effort to get to know the Clan."

Scorch dipped her head, feeling shamed by those reproachful blue eyes. But what was more irksome was Flamepaw's look of triumph that he shot her, as if Boulderpaw was on his side. "I'm more than willing, but I'm just busy right now," she tried to catch Boulderpaw's gaze but he turned away.

"Then don't expect the Clan to grow to like you much more," he mewed indifferently, walking back to the other apprentices. Scorch watched him go, frowning. "Let's go back to camp," Boulderpaw mewed, padding across the dusk striped clearing.

The apprentices mewed their agreement and followed him. Scorch stayed where she was, still unsettled by Boulderpaw's indifferent attitude. Flamepaw was the last to leave, padding close to her and leaning down close to her ear, "You should get out of here while you can," he hissed, then broke into a run to catch up to the others.

Scorch stared at where they'd disappeared into the forest. She looked behind her, staring for a moment and then pouncing on the black tipped end of her tail. She sighed and sat up, no, it wasn't as much fun to play alone. It never was.

Scorch waited until the arrival of purple twilight to return to the ThunderClan camp. She held a mouse and a shrew between her teeth and wondered if any cat would notice that she'd brought food back for the others. But no cat even spared her a glance as she dropped it into the fresh-kill pile.

Between wariness and aroused melancholy feelings, she didn't feel hungry and the black and red she-cat headed off to the apprentices den without dinner. She paused at the bramble entrance, looking past the screen to see if Flamepaw was in there. Only Featherpaw of WindClan was in the den, quietly washing her silver tabby pelt.

Scorch crept past her to where she'd built her nest by Boulderpaw's. She'd built it as close to his as it had been in the ShadowClan camp, so that they could share their warmth and the nests would almost look like one. But now his nest had been moved so that there was a

tail-length in between them.

Scorch stared at the green space between their nests. It had only been a few days, had he really grown so far apart this quickly? How far away would he be a moon from now? She turned it over in her mind as she curled down in her nest. Was he distancing himself from her because of her unpopularity with the Clan? Was he being influenced? Or was she really just ignoring him so much that he felt the need to send her a message?

It felt empty- hollow space surrounding her. She closed her eyes as the other apprentices entered the den one at a time with hushed murmurs and sleepy chatter. Boulderpaw and Flamepaw were the last to enter together. Scorch slowed her breathing to make it look like she was sleeping and remained still as they paused over her nest.

"It really isn't good for her to be giving off such an unfavorable impression," Boulderpaw's low mew was worried.

"It isn't good for you either. Right now, you're the Clan's hero for beating Pinefur. But if you keep defending her, she's only going to drag you down," Flamepaw mewed.

"Then I'll be dragged down," Boulderpaw snapped, "She's been my friend for too long. I can't abandon her. She's just going through a hard time with losing her friend and coming to a new place." *He's making excuses for me,* it pained Scorch that he had to stoop so low for her.

"Going off on her own all day isn't going to help her. You should at least find out where she's going. Some cats are even wondering if she's giving our secrets away to ShadowClan and RiverClan. Or worse, Pinefur," Flamepaw warned.

She could hear Boulderpaw's tail slash through the air and sense his outrage. "Impossible. Besides, Scorch doesn't even think that way. She wouldn't give away secrets because she wouldn't know why any cat would have any use for those secrets. She thinks all the Clans are the same and should help each other like a big family."

Flamepaw snorted, "Sounds like something Pinefur could have fed her."

"She's not affiliated with Pinefur! She hasn't even met the cat, for StarClan's sake!" Boulderpaw sounded like he was having a hard time keeping his voice down.

"Clam down. It's not what I think, it's just what I've been hearing in some of the rumors and you should get it cleared up as soon as you can for both your sakes," Flamepaw voice turned fainter as if he turned away and a few moments later Scorch heard a soft grunt as he curled down in his nest. Boulderpaw bent down his head and touched her ear lightly with his muzzle.

Scorch felt a pleasant tickle run down her spine but remained still as Boulderpaw went to his own nest. Now, sleep came happily and she felt reassured. Boulderpaw wasn't leaving her, he just wanted to give her space to do better. And she would, the black and red face turned peaceful as she entered sleep, free of mirages.

...

"Scorch! Come out of it!" Time's voice growled above her. Scorch stretched her eyes open, panting heavily and eyes staring at nothing. She laid on her side, face pressed against the dry ground. Sneezing at the dirt, she sat up and wobbled shakily, her eyes flashing around as if she had been spinning around.

"You weren't able to come out of it this time either!" Time scowled.

Scorch shrugged, it was only the sixth day. She squinted up at the sun. It was nearly sun-high. She'd gotten up before the dawn patrol to start practicing with Time and Sonya early, but they weren't making any more progress. "We'll try again tomorrow," she sighed, starting to plod down the hill.

"You're leaving already?" Sonya asked, the white and ginger she-cat trotted after her.

"Yeah, I need to be more involved with the Clan so that they'll trust me more. I'll need them to be able to listen to me if we want Pinefur

taken care of before he can retaliate," Scorch answered.

She glanced at her silent friend, a pensive look was on Sonya's white face and Scorch suddenly noticed how thin the she-cat looked. "Are you okay? You don't look too well," Scorch mewed, frowning as she looked Sonya up and down. The shimmer was gone from her fur and as she stared Sonya broke off into a cough. "If allergies are making it hard for you to hunt, I can help," Scorch offered.

Sonya shook her head, "I'm getting plenty of food, I'm just having trouble sleeping," the she-cat mewed. "Don't worry, it'll pass soon."

"If you say so," Scorch mewed, unconvinced. She decided to ask the medicine-cats if they knew anything to help with allergies.

"Now, you wait a moment," Time growled, appearing in front of her. His pelt of shadows seemed to be frothing and jumping in anger, making him look bigger. "You will not leave until you can come out of the mirages on your own. We have to make some kind of progress today."

Scorch looked up at the sun, it wasn't quite sun-high yet. If she hurried she could get back before it had crossed half the remaining sky. "Okay, I'll give it one last try," she dragged her paws back up to the top of the hill and sat down, curling her tail over her paws.

"Okay, now concentrate on the peace. You're not in your mirages, you are simply an observer. An outsider that must not be seen and needs to retain complete stillness and control," Time's mew lulled her off as she felt the surging waves of the world ebb and flow first at her paws, then all around her.

Her fur seemed to move and she closed her eyes, imagining herself standing on the silver-coated lake with the surrounding territories spinning all around her, but not touching the lake. The images came, one after another. Sometimes in quick succession, other time she focused on one for moments on end.

"Very good, keep it up for a little longer," Sonya purred.

Scorch kept focusing, seeing much but observing little. The images were too broken to form a story in her head and they left her none the wiser. But some touched her, an image of a mother tenderly cleaning her kits and a young cat standing proudly at the top of a hill with the wind rippling his fur as the sunrise washed over the sky and surrounding hills.

It was exhilarating and horrible. Not all of the images were nice, she saw cats lying in puddles of blood and huddling in dens that stank of darkness and terror. She came to the same realization she always did, the world was wonderfully terrifying.

Her fur prickled, a low rumbling coming over her. For the past six days it always came at least once in these sessions. Instead of just observing, she was in the mirage, yet still in her center of peace. The sun shone down on her back and the ground was coarse green. The rumbling grew and she knew what would happen next even as she crouched against the ground. It slipped and tore itself away from her paws, tumbling down and taking her with it. She reached up, stretching for the sun and there appeared the one brown paw and one black paw.

"Okay, see if you can come out of this now. Slowly push the mirages aside, slowly, very slowly," Time urged.

As the darkness of the dream mirage pressed in, Scorch slowly concentrated. It wasn't real, she wasn't really falling. These images in her head, the sensation that pulled her into the stream of the world's memories. She mentally backed away from it, pulling herself out one paw at a time until every hair on her pelt was free and she was left with silence.

Blinking open her eyes, she squinted at the contrastingly bright light and looked at the jubilant face of Sonya and the conceding one of Time. "Excellent," the black tom purred.

"I did it?" Scorch realized that she hadn't fallen over or cried out, no cat had been shaking her awake either. Happiness rolled out a purr and she kinked her tail over her back.

Time sat down with a sigh as Sonya nuzzled her. "At least you

finally managed to do that. And now that you have, I want you to practice it on your own. You shouldn't need Sonya to shake you awake now so I can help you do it by your camp or wherever it is you live," Time sniffed.

"Really? Why didn't we just do it that way in the first place?" Scorch huffed, thinking of how much time she'd spent trekking back and forth.

"Because of this," Time growled, sticking his paw toward her. It passed right through her and she startled, jumping away with her pelt bristling. "I can't physically shake you awake, so that's why we needed Sonya here. But now that you have it, we can practice it more. However, we can't get into the more advanced stuff without Sonya. But at least you can grow used to doing this on your own."

Scorch nodded, "Alright, now, I've gotta run!" she called, already bounding down the hill so fast she nearly lost her paws. She raced through the pine forest and soon the pines mingled with the blossoming leaf trees as thick undergrowth started to cover the ground.

Skirting around a bramble bush, she leaped over a tiny stream and entered ThunderClan's forest. Slowing down, she tasted the air. If you could find any prey on the way back, that might be an excuse to use for where she'd been.

The musky scent of mouse washed over her, but it was stale and she continued on. Pausing beneath a white-petaled tree in bloom, Scorch looked around. There were lots of old trees with roots twisted above ground and leaves underneath for small rodents to hide in.

She opened her mouth to draw in the scent and recognized shrew, not her favorite, but still edible. Crouching to the ground, her mind flew back to all the lessons she'd had with Painted and Leafpaw- both who were now dead. Drawing her paws forward carefully, she stalked toward the scent. There was no breeze in the forest so she didn't have to worry about that and no twigs littered the ground in front of her.

Movement flashed at the side of her vision and she stiffened, seeing the long nose of a shrew rummaging around the leaves at the base of a gnarled old oak tree. Turning carefully, she stilled her trembling tail and circled around behind the shrew, unsheathing her claws.

Fixing her gaze on the shrew she held her breath leaped, claws flashing toward the rodent and hooking it to the ground where she killed it. *Excellent!* Pleased, she picked it up. Her ears twitched as her belly rumbled. She'd eaten that morning before she left, but she'd traveled quite a bit around the forest and she hadn't eaten anything the night before. Would it be wrong if she ate this now?

Luckily, it was a shrew, so it wasn't too tempting for her. Even though she didn't see the harm of eating in the forest if she was just going to eat at camp, she couldn't imagine any cat being pleased that she'd broken the Warrior-code.

As she continued toward camp, she came upon an injured blackbird fluttering helplessly along the ground. It was too good of a catch and it would probably be more merciful to kill it than leave it there suffering. So she entered ThunderClan's sun filled camp with a respectable catch which she deposited proudly, taking a mouse for herself to quiet the rumbling in her belly.

Sitting down in front of the bramble screen of the medicine-cat's den, Scorch dug into her mouse, observing the cats in the clearing as she did so. The ThunderClan she-cats Spiritstorm and Ivyfur were sharing tongues on a sun soaked rock near the empty elders den. Several other cats were sharing tongues as well during the warmest part of the day. The WindClan apprentice Featherpaw was quietly dabbing at a feather that drifted along the ground.

Scorch regarded the silver tabby she-cat quietly. Featherpaw was probably the quietest cat she'd ever met and extremely shy. *She's always alone, too*. Not even the other WindClan apprentice, Deerpaw, took notice of the younger apprentice.

Scorch tilted her head to the side, Featherpaw was hardly old enough to be an apprentice, but she'd heard that- like ThunderClan- there hadn't been a kit in WindClan for moons. She shrugged her

small shoulders, she'd probably heard it wrong, or Featherpaw was older than she looked. In any case, Scorch was envious of Featherpaw's quietness, every cat was telling her to shut up all the time.

Finishing the mouse, she licked the last scraps from her muzzle and stood up, stretching in a shaft of sunlight. Turning around, she slid past the bramble screen into the cool, dim cave where the medicine-cats lived.

She mewed to make them aware of her presence and the two she-cats looked up from a bunch of herbs they were sorting in the back shadows of the den. "Yes, Scorch?" Skypool asked, getting up and padding over to her.

"I wanted to ask if you knew of any herbs that could help with allergies," Scorch asked.

"Why? Are you ill?" Willowleaf asked, the red she-cat's black tabby stripes blended in with the dark light.

Scorch shook her head, looking up at Skypool, "Just curious."

Willowleaf glanced back at them, green eyes narrowed to slits. "I don't know of any herbs that prevent allergies, but there are things to help ease the symptoms of allergies," the WindClan medicine-cat mewed, turning back to her work.

"Like?" Scorch prodded, looking back at Skypool who was carefully considering the piles of herbs she had. "Well, if a cat is coughing too much, a dose of honey will help soothe it. If the eyes are itchy, celandine will help."

"Juniper berries might also help with coughing," Willowwleaf offered, still bent over her herbs.

Scorch's ears pricked, "Juniper berries?" Honey couldn't be harvested right now and celandine hadn't grown back yet, but there should already be juniper berries on the bushes. "Thanks!" she mewed, bouncing out of the den.

In the clearing, a few cats turned their heads as she charged out

into the forest, heading along a trail through the greenery. The trail led toward the border with WindClan, but she exited off the trail before is could reach the border.

Off the trail a bit lay a cluster of juniper bushes, their green branches dotted with the dark blue berries. Scorch padded past a clump of ferns into the clearing where the bushes grew. The grass was coarse and dry, and the crumbling dirt reminded Scorch of the hill she trained upon.

Sitting by the bush, she reached up with her claws and plucked the berries off, dropping them in a pile at her paws. She hummed happily, it would definitely help Sonya sleep better when she didn't have to cough all the time.

The sun burned on her black and red mottled fur and she found herself anticipating going down to the lake for a long drink. *I'll do that after I stash these berries, then I can hunt on the way to the lake and back*. She nodded to herself, she'd also give some of these berries to the medicine-cats, that would show the Clan that she could be helpful.

Standing up, Scorch stretched and yawned, her fur warmed through and her gaze lazy after spending so much time picking berries. Looking down at the pile with a mouse-length diameter, she wondered if she'd taken too much, it would be difficult to carry them all back.

Pawing them into a tighter pile she wondered if she could gather some moss and use it to carry the berries in a bundle. *Yeah, that'll work*. Turning away from the bush, Scorch stiffened as she spotted a cat standing in the shadows at the edge of the clearing, watching her.

With the glare of the sun in her eyes, she couldn't see clearly enough even when she squinted. Raising her nose, she sniffed the air, but without a breeze to carry the scent she couldn't distinguish it from the heavy juniper scent that covered her.

"So, you're one of those rogues that drove me out, eh?" the cat asked, stepping forward into the sunlight. Scorch stiffened, the

copper-brown fur and the intense green graze made the cat easy to recognize in the light. Pinefur; but what was he doing here?

She watched him cautiously as he padded closer. It wouldn't be difficult to run away, she wasn't sure that he wouldn't hurt her. However, he didn't show even the slightest hint of aggression. Not a ripple of muscle or the slightest tension in his shoulders.

He paused five tail-lengths from her, remaining standing but she noticed his sheathed claws. Scorch kept her own claws sheathed and remained relaxed, she didn't want to give him a reason to attack her. Her gaze watched him warily. "What do you want? This is ThunderClan's territory."

"I know, I am a ThunderClan cat," Pinefur mewed.

"More than one cat would have an objection to that," Scorch retorted.

Pinefur dipped his head, "They won't have an objection for long. But I wanted to ask you something different," he changed the subject, stepping closer.

Scorch warily moved so that the juniper bush wasn't at her back anymore but open forest. "And that would be?"

"I simply wanted to ask you who it was that came up with the plans of rebellion. I know they had outside help, they couldn't have managed to gather rogues to help them on their own. So, which outsider was it?" Pinefur inched closer and Scorch leaned away.

Her dark gaze watched him quietly. She had a feeling that even if she told him the truth he wouldn't believe it was her. "I don't know," she lied.

Pinefur's calm demeanor melted and a snarl crept over his face. "Don't go getting smart on me, you're hardly more than a kit, I could kill you in a heartbeat," he threatened. Now he was standing over her.

Scorch glowered up at him, setting her mouth in a hard line. He wouldn't bully her. Besides, he was bluffing, he didn't want to cause

the noise of a fight, she could sense it. "How about I just take you back to my camp until you feel ready to talk?" Pinefur threatened.

Scorch stiffened, now that, he could probably get away with. She trembled, and the ground trembled with her. "What?" Pinefur's eyes widened and he took a step away from her.

Scorch's mind flashed with memories. The one that had haunted her, of the ground failing her. Had that not been a mirage of the past, but a premonition of the future? It seemed so, she could feel the eerily familiar feeling of the sun beating down on her back but chills filling her inside. The coarse grass that she dug her claws into was covered with loose dirt and didn't hold her steady.

She crouched to the ground, terror freezing her to where she was. Pinefur stood in front of her on the now violently shaking ground. He turned, as if to jump away, as the ground started cracking- deep fissures breaking across the ground. And then the ground was gone, it disappeared down deep below her. And suddenly she was falling, not a thing against her paws as she exchanged a horrified look with Pinefur.

Part of her felt that she must be dreaming. But the panic was real and as she fell below the rim of the earth she reached up, the sun a mocking halo that silhouetted her black paw, Pinefur's brown paw next to her failed to catch anything but dying light as well. Everything was snuffed out, everything turned black as she was left falling. Next, she was aware of noise- then pain.

Chapter 51: Avenging

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Scorch coughed, her mouth coated with dust and the smell of dirt filling her lungs. Lifting her head, she looked around the dark cave she'd fallen into. Dust obscured the light, tossed into the air by the landslide, just a little golden light shone through the hole high above her head.

Coughing some more, Scorch lurched to her paws, pulling herself out of the loose dirt that covered her and shaking her rumpled pelt, stumbling onto the cave floor. The ground was cold and ridged; the scent of wet stone mixing startlingly with the dusty dirt. Scorch shivered, it was much colder down here, she could feel it pressing down on her warm pelt.

Wait, where is- She spun around, recalling that she was not the only one to have the misfortune of falling down here. Regarding the heap of dirt that towered above her almost to the ceiling of the cave, Scorch wondered if it would have been possible that he had died in the fall. No, that would be too easy.

Circling around the dirt pile, she came upon the tyrannical leader- his back legs pinned beneath the pile and his eyes were closed. A gash to his head showed that he had hit his head on a rock. Scorch shifted on her paws, her own body felt like it had been used in a game of moss-ball by a bunch of kits. But she supposed was lucky it was no worse than that.

Peering down a black tunnel that led away from the cavern, she couldn't make out a thing and when she sniffed the air, it just brought the promise of cold, wet rock. There were two other tunnels that all smelled the same as the first tunnel. Scorch sat down when she realized she was shaking, she needed to get out of here, but how? The pile of dirt wasn't high enough for her to get out through the top and she could easily get lost down here on her own.

She startled to her paws at the sound of groaning and realized Pinefur was waking up. Nervously, she glanced back as he raised his head and shook it groggily. His green eyes opened and split the darkness, but they were dull with pain and Scorch felt guilty. He was suffering and trapped, should she not try to help him?

And maybe he would know how to get out- since she was pretty sure they had fallen into one of the tunnels that ran between ThunderClan and WindClan territory. Cautiously, she padded over to stand in front of him. He looked up, using his forepaws to prop him up. But they slipped on the stone, sending his chin slamming against the hard floor.

Scorch flinched at his hiss of pain. "D-do you need help?" she asked, cursing her voice for being so small and tiny. She hadn't sounded like that above ground a few minutes before. But that was when she had been in a familiar place with a place to escape to, now she was trapped and needed help from a murderer. A murderer who had killed two of her precious friends.

Pinefur glared upward and she took a step back. "No," he growled curtly. He grunted as he tried to pull himself out, his front claws scratching on the floor.

"You have an injury on your head," Scorch mumbled, the blood was dripping onto the dusty floor, turning the dirt a deep crimson. Pinefur looked at her blankly. "There are no herbs down here, but you should clean it," Scorch mewed, more sure of herself.

Pinefur snorted and shook his head, "I thought I said I didn't want your help."

"So you did, but I have no reason to value your opinion," Scorch responded tartly. "I want to make a deal with you," she added, crouching down in front of him so that they were level.

"And that would be?" Pinefur's tone was still hostile, but his gaze was marred with pain.

"I'll help you get out of that and tend to your wounds. And you lead me out of the tunnels. Of course, we won't attack each other until

we get out," Scorch mewed.

Pinefur frowned, "I can get out of this on my own," he growled.

"But do you have a medicine-cat to tend your wounds?" Scorch challenged. Both medicine-cats were at the ThunderClan camp. "And besides that, I could always follow your scent trail. So it's more I that doesn't need you," she sniffed. More or less, she just wanted his promise not to attack her.

Pinefur scrutinized her under his piercing gaze for a few moments, "Fine, I agree. Now get me out of here," he growled.

Scorch curled her tail and jumped up on the dirt pile. *I just hope he isn't lying!* Digging her paws into the dirt, she carefully scraped it away so that it didn't send too much more falling down on him. "Is it getting loose?" she grunted.

Pinefur wriggled and inched forward, "Almost out of it," he growled. Scorch stuck her paws into the dirt and pushed two great pawfulls off his hind legs. Pinefur shot out of the dirt pile while the loosened pile of dirt cascaded onto Scorch. She barely leaped away in time, her paws skidding on the stone.

"Well, that was easier than I thought it would be," Scorch panted. She looked at Pinefur warily. Now that he was free, would he honor their agreement? Pinefur shook the dirt out of his fur, creating a cloud of dust around him and sending flecks of blood flying through the air to hit the cave walls. He stretched his muscles, testing them carefully and scratching his claws against the rough stone.

"Alright," he looked at her, his green gaze guarded and she couldn't tell what he was feeling. His sense was carefully neutral, just like above ground. He padded toward her and she tensed, unsheathing her claws. But he padded past her, heading for the tunnel behind her. "I think this is the right one," he mewed.

Scorch's ears pricked as she turned toward him, a little more relaxed. Trotting after him, she wondered how wise it was for her to follow a known killer into such an utterly dark place. But she remained a few paces behind him in the narrow space and as her

vision faded to black she listened carefully for his steady pawsteps.

The air held a tang of ice and she tasted it on her tongue, wet and heavy- she could almost drink it out of the air. "I heard these tunnels sometimes flood, is that true?" Scorch asked.

Pinefur grunted in response.

Scorch snorted. "How much further?" she asked.

"We only just started moving, it'll be a while," Pinefur growled scathingly.

"Surely there must have been an entrance nearby," Scorch mewed.

"There was, but I would rather come up in WindClan territory," Pinefur answered.

Scorch scowled and looked down the branching off tunnels. The air had started to carry a peaty scent and she guessed they were under WindClan territory right now. She stiffened and looked forward, though she was still blind, when Pinefur's paw steps stopped.

"I wanted to ask you something," Pinefur began, sounding strangely curious. "What reason do the rogues have for helping the Clans? I managed to get rogues on my side because they hated the Clans. I can't hardly imagine many rogues being willing to risk their lives to help the Clans."

Scorch flinched, remembering Painted and how much her friend had loathed the Clans. In the end, the only explanation for why the she-cat had given the ultimate sacrifice for the Clans was because of her. "I don't know why, individually, they wanted to help. But I'm sure they all liked the idea of living in a group, at least for the end of the cold season," Scorch mewed awkwardly. Most of the black cats planned on leaving, but that wouldn't be a good thing to tell Pinefur.

"Well, how about you. Why is such a young cat helping the Clans? You're not a Clan cat, right? But you carry a scent that mixes with all four Clans," Pinefur's mew was curious.

Scorch stiffened, she still carried some of RiverClan and ShadowClan's scent? "My reasons are my own," she answered curtly. In all honesty, she hadn't even told Boulderpaw the full story yet. Only a select few cats knew that her father had once been ShadowClan, and that didn't explain why she'd helped the other Clans anyways.

Pinefur growled, "I don't know what help you could be to the Clans. Let's keep moving." His paw steps echoed through the darkness again. Scorch followed, her whiskers brushing against the stone wall.

"But if I may, what are your reasons for trying to conquer the Clans?" Scorch asked, now curious herself.

Pinefur snorted, "It's not anything a rogue kit like you could understand," he snarled. But for the first time, she sensed an emotion from him- pain.

"I'm actually seven moons old," she responded tartly. "And I've been living with the Clans for longer than I haven't. What couldn't I understand?"

Pinefur stopped and sniffed the air, "It doesn't matter. As far as the Clans are concerned, I'm a monster. But I won't stop, I won't yield," he growled, his claws scratching across the tunnel's floor. "They're all hare-brained!" he hissed, "They fight to remain the same. And force innocent cats to tear each other apart," his voice vibrated with anger.

Scorch bristled in indignation, "You forced innocent apprentices to tear each apart. I don't know how you can criticize them," she mewed tightly.

"That was different. They *weren't* innocent, they betrayed me, they betrayed their Clans, they-" a rabid tone crept in to his voice and harsh breathing filled the tunnel.

"They didn't betray you. You were the only one who betrayed someone," Scorch scowled, feeling disgusted by his twisted perception. The least he could do was recognize why the Clans

hated him.

"Not true!" Pinefur's screech rang through the tunnel like the piercing cry of a bat, Scorch slunk against the side of the tunnel. "The Clan betrayed me first. No one knows what they did, or care, but I remember- I remember it all. The day they stole everything from me-"

Scorch shivered, this sounded eerily reminiscent of Painted- the same self-justified wrath. "What did they do?" Surely it wouldn't hurt to try to understand him better, understanding the enemy was the first step to victory.

Pinefur's trembled, she could hear his fur brushing against the tunnel wall. "Stormstar was a fool, such a fool," he muttered, his paws starting up again and padding quickly through the darkness. "She preached about peace, and then forced her cats into war with hardly more reason than a stolen mouse."

Scorch was trembling now, from the intensity of his barely contained fury. It felt like a tiny flame that was slowly burning into a bright blaze, searing her with its heat. "My mate was killed in one of those senseless battle. So was our deputy. And did Stormstar apologize? No," he scoffed, bitterness spitting from his mouth. "She relieved her conscience by giving me a position that I never wanted, in service of a leader I hated."

Pinefur dropped into harsh breathing again and Scorch stood still behind him, waiting somberly. The fur along her spine lifted as the tom started laughing, a cruel, coarse laughter. "But the joke was on her!" he reveled. "It was a small step for me to kill her and become leader! It doesn't matter if StarClan refuses to recognize me. I'm the rightful leader! And with this power, I can take over all the Clans so that there will never be anymore dumb battles. The other Clan cats can't see it yet, but they will. A new, bright dawn is on the horizon and I'll lead them to it!"

Pinefur started off and rounded a bend in the tunnel. As if on cue, a light appeared at the end of the tunnel and Scorch felt a warm, heather-scented breeze wash over her. Hurrying forward, Pinefur shot out of the tunnel and she followed him, emerging out of the

darkness onto a bright green hillside dotted with purple heather.

The glow of the sun alighted upon yellow and white flowers and the distant lake sparkled like an enormous pool of stars in the sunlight. "There, we made it out," Pinefur sighed. Scorch looked back at him, his copper-brown fur was dappled with sunlight and his green eyes were narrowed into a reserved gaze. The crazed edge to his tone imperceptible on his face. He turned to her, "Now, fix up my wounds," he demanded.

Scorch dipped her head and scrounged the hillside, finding cobwebs by the tunnel entrance and goldenrod among the flowering plants. She returned to the murderous leader and helped him clean his wounds, feeling her pelt prickle uneasily as she touched the fearsome cat.

Shyly, she had him bend his head for her to get a better look at his wound. It had stopped bleeding and she smoothed the goldenrod poultice into it and bound some cobwebs lightly over it. Looking over his pelt, she saw only a few scratches that hadn't broken the skin and she dipped her head. "You're good to go," she mumbled, stepping back.

Pinefur rolled his shoulders and tested himself with a long stretch. He looked at her and nodded, "Thank you."

Scorch stared at him blankly. Did he just thank her? Her stomach flopped and she felt sick. He had upheld their agreement and had thanked her. He was so much from the murderer she'd expected him be, nowhere near as monstrous as Nightwing. And yet, despite his capacity for kindness, he had chosen a path of cruelty- or had pain put him on that path?

"Can I ask one thing?" Scorch asked, staring at her paws.

"If I can ask you something as well," Pinefur mewed. "But you can go first," he invited with a sweep of his tail.

She looked up, forcing herself to meet the serpent green gaze. "If you want to stop the Clans from killing each other, than why have you killed so many?"

Pinefur shrugged, turning his head to look at the lake. "They tried to kill me. I couldn't just let them go unpunished. If I'd exiled them they'd just come back. I only ever killed those who were in charge of the rebellions. I could have been a lot worse," he growled.

"But you made those apprentices kill each other! They didn't rebel!" Scorch protested, her chest hot with grief as she remembered pretty Leafpaw.

Pinefur continued staring at the lake, "One of them betrayed me, I was sure that the traitor would show himself to save the others. But he didn't and I couldn't find out who it was until later. And once I said I would do it, I had to go through with it."

Scorch shivered, "So, who was it?" Her pelt felt hot as he looked back at her. But anger was a powerful driving force, burning through her. Which apprentice had it been that was so selfish and cowardly to let two innocent apprentices die for his mistakes? *I hope it's Flamepaw, that'll give me more reason to hate him after he killed Leafpaw.*

Pinefur sneered, "It was that runt, Boulderpaw."

Scorch flinched like she'd been hit in the face. The fire turned to ice and she could feel herself shaking. "Oh." It was the only sound she could muster and she stared wide-eyed at the ground, panting as if she had just been struck in the belly. *It was Boulderpaw? But why, how? He let Leafpaw die? No! Pinefur's lying, and it's his fault anyways*. She glared at the copper-brown tom. "You're lying!" she hissed.

"Am I?" Pinefur challenged. "Boulderpaw left not long after that. So I know it was him who was disobeying the rules and leaving ThunderClan territory."

Scorch stiffened. It was true, Boulderpaw *had* been leaving ThunderClan territory. Because she had asked him to. Was it really her fault? "Now, you have to answer my question," Pinefur growled. "Do you know a cat named, 'Scorch?'"

Scorch startled out of her despair and stared up at him, "Yes," she rasped.

Pinefur narrowed his gaze, "Is it true that she's in charge of the rogues?" he growled.

Scorch dipped her head, "Depends who you ask," she muttered.

"But she *is* the one that brought the rogues, right?" Pinefur pressed.

Scorch nodded, starting to back away. She didn't feel right, she felt wrong. Her belly was clenched and her pelt felt clammy. "I need to leave," she mewed, turning and bounding over the ridge, the wind streaming her tail behind her. The green grass was soft, the sun's rays were warm, and the wind was playful as her shadow stretched long behind her.

A shadowed haze of trees rose in the distance and she headed for it desperately. Bounding over the stream she reentered ThunderClan territory and slowed, her sides heaving as she tried to catch her breath. As Scorch marched over the leaf mold her tail dropped behind her and she stared at the ground, stumbling over roots and around bushes.

Was it really her fault that both her friends had died? Leafpaw and Painted had both had their lives ended because of her choices. Her chest grew tighter and tighter until she had to sit down and just breathe. Sobs mixed in with her pants as old and new feelings of grief gripped her and she stared up through the green haze that crept over the tree branches like a furry caterpillar.

As dusk descended, the sky became stained with hues of orange, the clouds streaking it with a dusky purple. Shadows stretched around her, pointing back toward the moorland, though it was long out of sight. She shivered, fluffing up her dirty pelt against the oncoming chill of night.

Scorch looked blankly at her paws. She could hear Painted's last, laborious breaths, feel Boulderpaw trembling in fear besides her, felt her heart beat slowing. She looked up at the sky, even Leafpaw's death could be traced back to her own naive actions. She crouched against the ground, her nose pressed in her paws. *Maybe I should leave before any other cat I care for can die.*

...

"You're getting much better at this," Time mewed, looking down at her with his narrowed red eyes. Scorch groaned, rolling over from her back to her belly and stretching out her legs like a frog. The cool dew of morning dampened her belly fur, birdsong echoing through the still air.

Scorch yawned, it was so early. But Time had insisted the past few days that she get up early to train with him. *It's also been four days since I fell down into the tunnels*. She glanced around anxiously, her pelt prickling.

She couldn't explain it, but since then, she felt as if she were being watched. It was even worse in camp, it seemed every cat was watching her when she wasn't paying any attention, suspicious of her. Scorch shook out her fur and got to her paws, was she just imagining it since she was partly responsible for Leafpaw's demise? Or had they somehow found out? *Boulderpaw wouldn't have said, surely!*

Alarmed, she whipped around and looked again through the grayness of morning. "No one else is here," Time reassured her.

Her pelt prickled, "How can you be sure?"

Time sighed and shook his head, not bothering to explain. "Have you noticed anything different about your powers? Have the mirages been occurring less?"

Scorch tilted her head the side, considering. "Yeah, I haven't noticed them happening when I'm doing something. Just when I'm still kind of thinking," she mewed.

Time nodded, "Then we're making progress. Plus, you can come out of them a lot more smoothly now. Tomorrow we'll need to go see Sonya and start working on something new," he mewed, stretching. "Until then, enjoy your Clan stuff."

Scorch watched him tread silently behind a tree, but he didn't appear again on the other side. He simply vanished. She shrugged

and looked around, she was far enough away from the hollow where the camp laid that she wouldn't be heard, but close enough that she could get there quickly.

It also meant that cats from camp could get to her quickly. And with all that was going on, with their suspicion of her and her mostly unfounded guilt, she preferred to not be caught flat-footed. Scorch started out for the camp, passing trough the unfurling plants and sniffing the air. She relaxed slightly when she could only detect the green scent of growing things.

The sky was starting to lighten, threads of pale yellow light turning the sky a pale blue. Pausing as the scent of mouse washed over her, she turned around slowly, crouching as she spotted the little creature shuffling around at the base of a fern bush.

With no wind, she didn't have to circle around and crept up slowly, sliding her paws along the fresh grass so that she didn't step on any twigs. Her mouth watered as the musky scent washed over her, she hadn't eaten anything since the night before.

A crack rang out like a clap of thunder and she jumped. The mouse was gone before she could recover from her surprise. Hissing with annoyance, she stood up, glaring around the gray and green world. "Boulderpaw?" she spotted the gray apprentice standing with his paw on a broken twig.

She lashed her tail, "You scared away my prey," she accused him.

"Is it true?" he growled, his blue eyes glowering down on her as he perched himself on a gnarled root.

"Is what true?" Scorch snapped, *good gracious, what did I do now?*

Boulderpaw's gaze swept her over and Scorch felt her fur prickle under his cold stare. He hadn't acted like this since she had brought the black cats to the ShadowClan camp. The same vaguely disappointed feeling was there too, she could sense it from him.

"Are you plotting with Pinefur?"

Scorch was so startled that she could only stare at him dumbly.

"Huh?"

"Are you plotting with Pinefur!" Boulderpaw demanded angrily, jumping down from the root to stalk toward her, tail whipping angrily behind him. "Flamepaw said he saw you with Pinefur a few days ago and you smelled like WindClan that night, *and* you were extra quiet!"

Scorch flinched, she was sure that was the day she had been trapped in the tunnels with Pinefur. No cat had noticed her disappearance so she hadn't said anything. But, looking into Boulderpaw's blazing eyes, she wondered if keeping secrets from him again maybe hadn't been the best decision.

Scorch shook her head at Boulderpaw's accusations, "I'm not plotting with Pinefur," she mewed firmly.

Boulderpaw narrowed his eyes, "How do I know?" he growled. "Every cat knows that the spy is among us, and all we know is that the cat has green eyes. *You* have green eyes."

Scorch frowned and cuffed his ears, her claws slightly out. He ducked away, glaring at her, "What was that for?" he hissed.

"For being an idiot," she retorted. "ThunderClan had a spy among them before I even came to the Clans. Or had you forgotten that your father was betrayed and that was why he was killed?" She couldn't believe that Boulderpaw would be so quick to accuse her without even thinking about it.

Boulderpaw looked at her with wide eyes, and she was glad that relief sparkled in the blue depths as he realized his folly. She sighed and sat down, "That day, I was collecting juniper berries and Pinefur confronted me, threateningly of course. We must have been standing on a weak path of earth- it was really dry and crumbly- and the ground gave way. We fell into one of the tunnels and Pinefur was the only one who knew how to get out. So I treated his injuries, and in return, he led me out," Scorch mewed, looking away. She didn't know what Boulderpaw would think of her little adventure, and she really didn't want to think about it herself. Pinefur's words, his venom against the Clans, it was still startling.

Boulderpaw let out a breath in relief, "I'm glad that's it. I feel kind of dumb now, sorry," he mewed, dipping his head sheepishly.

Scorch looked at him, even more surprised then before. Had he just apologized? He'd been wrong before, but he hadn't apologized before. She couldn't decide if she liked the change or not. "It's okay, I'm glad you asked me before a rumor sprang up around camp," Scorch giggled.

Boulderpaw winced and Scorch glared at him, "You didn't," she growled warningly.

"*I* didn't," Boulderpaw shook his head. "But Flamepaw has loose lips. Every cat knows and I don't know how many would believe that story you told." he mewed. Scorch stiffened, feeling nervous. How would she convince them to go along with her plans if they didn't trust her? Boulderpaw shrugged, reading her expression. "Well, as long as you aren't a traitor, I'm satisfied. Now let's get to camp, something special is happening this morning," he mewed, instantly brightening.

Scorch followed him as he turned, "What's going on?" she asked, loping behind him. She'd been distracted lately and couldn't remember hearing of anything out of the ordinary.

Boulderpaw grinned at her over his shoulder, looking like an excited kit. "You'll find out," he mewed, bounding forward in a burst of speed.

Scorch pricked her ears, curious, and chased after him on the winding trail back to camp, the last scraps of fog vanishing in their wake. The first shimmers of sunlight dappled the shadows with light and the grass, wet with dew, sparkled.

They entered the camp through the gorse tunnel and Scorch paused, looking around uncertainly. It was only dawn, but the hollow was full of cats and it buzzed with noise and a sense of anticipation. Boulderpaw broke away from her and joined his sister and Flamepaw in the middle of the hollow.

Scorch looked around, feeling her pelt prickle under the shadowed

gaze of the surrounding cats. She slunk around the edges of camp until she paused, looking around for the other apprentices. Deerpaw sat among the other WindClan warriors by the elders den, where WindClan was sleeping since there were no elders.

Then Scorch spotted Featherpaw at the back of the crowd. She slipped past a pair of cats and settled down on the ground by the silver she-cat. Featherpaw looked up at her but didn't say anything. "Hey," Scorch mewed quietly, looking down sheepishly at the she-cat, it felt odd to be larger than some cat for once.

Featherpaw's amber eyes widened and the she-cat quickly snapped her attention to the middle of the camp where a ring had been formed around Boulderpaw, Moonpaw, and Flamepaw. Scorch brought her attention there too, but she didn't understand.

"What's going on?" she asked, turning to Featherpaw again.

The silver tabby looked up again, startled. "Oh, I think they're going to be made warriors," Featherpaw mewed feebly.

Scorch nodded, her fur prickling in excitement. So that's why Boulderpaw had been so happy! He was finally being made a warrior! Scorch could feel her chest swell with pride and warmth. "But who is going to make them warriors? There's no leader yet, right?" Scorch tilted her head curiously.

"I think Skypool will be doing the ceremony. She is the medicine-cat, and without a leader or deputy, that's where the responsibility falls," Featherpaw mewed.

Scorch nodded, watching the silver-blue she-cat. Her dark gray patches looked blue in the shadows and the white on her paws blended in with the pale ground as the medicine-cat came to stand before the soon to be warriors, looking up at the slowly brightening sky.

"In the absence of a leader I, Skypool, medicine-cat of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Skypool looked back down at the apprentices, "Flamepaw, Moonpaw, Boulderpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do," the three cats spoke in unison, their eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Skypool purred, "Then by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Flamepaw," she looked at the oldest apprentice. "From this moment on you will be known as Flameclaw. StarClan honors your courage and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Flameclaw respectively dipped his head and stepped back.

Scorch leaned closer to Featherpaw, "Doesn't the leader usually rest her chin on the warrior's head, and then the warrior gives her shoulder a lick?" She was sure that was how Flashstrike's ceremony had gone.

Featherpaw nodded, not taking her longing gaze off of the ceremony. "Since Skypool's a medicine-cat, they're showing her a different kind of respect though."

Scorch nodded again and watched as Moonpaw stepped forward. "Moonpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Moonfrost. StarClan honors your dedication and intelligence and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Moonfrost dipped her head and stepped back.

Scorch's tail quivered, only Boulderpaw was left. He stood alone in the clearing, the gray shadows of morning washing over his pelt. His blue eyes glowed, not with excitement as before, but with strength. He was ready to become a warrior and accept the responsibility that came with it.

"Boulderpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Boulderfall. StarClan honors your bravery and strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." As Boulderfall stepped back among the warriors as cries filled the air.

"Flameclaw! Moonfrost! Boulderfall!" Scorch joined in, cheering as

loudly as she could. She looked happily at Featherpaw, but the silver she-cat just sat there with her shoulders slumped, staring enviously at the new warriors.

"I'm sure you'll be a warrior soon enough," Scorch mewed kindly, laying her tail across Featherpaw's shoulders. Featherpaw flinched and looked up at her with wide eyes.

"How-" Featherpaw's question was broken off as Boulderfall bounded over to her.

"What do you think about that, a real warrior!" He puffed his chest with pride. Scorch had never seem him look so happy and she giggled, joy filling her as she flicked his ears with her tail.

"I never thought I'd see the day," she joked, prodding him in the ribs.

"I'll have to sit vigil tonight, but they're letting me lead my first hunting patrol. Do you want to come?" Boulderfall asked shyly. Scorch purred, feeling like he was trying to apologize for earlier.

"You bet," she got up and stretched. It felt like things couldn't be better. Even the suspicious looks from earlier had disappeared in the spirit of jubilation. The sky was paling to a vibrant blue and the sun's golden rays danced across the tops of the trees that looked a little greener than yesterday.

She started to follow Boulderfall to the entrance where a few other cats had gathered. "Oh," she mewed, looking over her shoulder, "See you later, Featherpaw," she mewed, waving her tail. Featherpaw raised her tail to show she'd heard, but didn't respond.

Across the clearing, Scorch frowned, thinking of Featherpaw's big, hollow eyes. They seemed almost haunting in her loneliness. Boulderfall turned to her at the entrance, a puzzled expression on his face. "Who were you talking to earlier?" he mewed.

Scorch glanced up at him, still half thinking of Featherpaw. "When?" She asked, looking around.

"During the warrior ceremony, and afterward you said goodbye to

some cat. But I didn't see anyone," Boulderfall frowned, his concerned gaze skimming over her.

"I was sitting with Featherpaw, I don't see where she went off to now though..." Scorch mewed, looking around. When she looked back at Boulderfall, she could feel his shock pulsing beneath his pelt. "Is there something wrong?" she asked cautiously.

Boulderfall shook his head slowly and leaned toward her ear, "Just don't mention Featherpaw's name again. We'll talk about this later." Then he backed away and led the cats out of the camp. Scorch looked after him through the dark tunnel before following, *what was that all about?*

Chapter 52: Moonstruck

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Through the green forest, Scorch trotted after the hunting patrol. The scent of the earth wafted up especially strong as the sunlight burned the morning dew away. The forest buzzed with insects flying around the flowering plants and the air was warm and wet.

Boulderfall paced at the head of the patrol, his muscles rippling under his gray pelt like the powerful currents of a stream. The ThunderClan she-cat Spiritstorm and the two WindClan warriors Jumpblaze and Redleap composed the rest of the hunting patrol.

At least ThunderClan is allowing WindClan to join them on patrols. Scorch watched the tense silence between the cats and sighed. They really didn't function anywhere near as well as RiverClan and ShadowClan. They padded over a small rise and came to a grassy glade covered in scattered brush but free of the cover of trees.

"Let's start here, there ought to be something in all these bushes," Boulderfall mewed, lifting his head commandingly. Scorch admired how quickly he had made the adjustment from apprentice to warrior. *Though, with all we've done, he's probably had more experience leading than most cats.*

The patrol quickly dispersed, the WindClan cats taking to the open slope while Spiritstorm padded back into the forest. Scorch stepped forward to Boulderfall's side. "It was smart to choose a place where both Clans would be able to hunt comfortably," she commented.

Boulderfall shrugged, "It's only logical to bring them to a place where they actually have a chance of catching something," he snorted, "But those scrawny rabbit-chasers will never be as good as a ThunderClan cat."

Scorch giggled at his silly prejudice, relaxing as the rising sun enveloped them in its warm embrace. She stretched, yawning, "I

could just sleep all day long," she sighed, watching Redleap flush a grouse out of the brush and then Jumpblaze pounce on the panicking bird.

"Scorch," Boulderfall turned to her seriously. "I wanted to talk to you about Featherpaw," he mewed, his voice dropping to nearly a whisper.

Scorch tilted her head, wonderingly. What was with the secrecy? She could feel his uncomfortableness like his fur was being brushed the wrong way. "She's awfully quiet, but she always looks so lonely and no cat ever seems to notice her," Scorch mewed empathetically, feeling sorry for the shy little apprentice.

Boulderfall shivered, "Scorch, that's what I wanted to tell you. There is no Featherpaw- not in ThunderClan and not in WindClan. I didn't see any cat with you and no cat else does either."

Scorch stared at him for a few moments, *he must be joking*. But there was no joke in his blue eyes, in fact, he looked almost fearful. "But, I saw her..." Scorch frowned, she had first seen Featherpaw in the WindClan den when she had rescued them from the WindClan camp. The silver tabby had always been with the WindClanc cats. And yet, no cat had ever mentioned or noticed her.

"But *I* saw her," Scorch looked at Boulderfall desperately. "I even talked to her! She told me her name the first night she slept in the apprentices den with us and I've seen her everyday at the camp."

Boulderfall shook his head, "I don't doubt that *you* see something. I know you have weird powers, but no other cat knows that. They're beginning to be convinced that you're crazy," he mewed, gently laying his tail over her shoulders.

"Crazy?" Scorch took a step back, disturbed. "Why would they think I'm crazy?"

Boulderfall shook his head, "When you talk to nothing and disappear for half a day at a time, cats start odd rumors. And rumors evolve quickly in a Clan. You need to quit this and just act like a normal cat for a while so that they stop it. Cats have a poor

memory for these kinds of things," he advised, blue eyes staring at her desperately.

Scorch frowned and looked down at her paws, "No, I need to find out why Featherpaw is here then. If she's not a living cat, then there has to be some reason why she's here," she mewed, looking up determinately at Boulderfall's crestfallen look. "Do *you* know something?" she inquired suspiciously, he was giving off a guilty sense.

Boulderfall sighed, "I can't trick you, huh?" he looked up at the sky for a moment, squinting his eyes against the brightness. "I knew her when she was alive. She was the WindClan apprentice that died in the same manner as Leafpaw."

Scorch flinched, guilt and fear flowing over her again. So she was responsible for Featherpaw's demise as well? That shy, sweet apprentice? Scorch swallowed the lump in her throat, feeling guilt and sadness crash over her. How many lives had she ended since she came here?

She turned away wearily, "Let's hunt for now, we can discuss this later," she mumbled. They split up to hunt, but Scorch was distracted by her thoughts and let easy catches slip through her claws, returning to the group with only a squirrel. Luckily, it was a plump squirrel and no cat criticized her even though they all had managed to snag at least two good pieces of prey in the warm weather.

They padded back toward camp, the prey that filled their mouths a comfortable excuse for the silence. A panicked crackling of leaves and twigs picked up Scorch's attention as she dragged at the back of the patrol. She paused and turned around, the rest of the patrol being alerted by the sound and turning with their fur bushed up.

Scorch recognized the scent and lifted her tail in greeting as the black she-cat thrust through the undergrowth onto the path. "Fox-dung!" the she-cat cursed, looking at her ragged pelt, "How can any cat stand to live in this place?"

"They mostly keep to the trails instead of forcing their way through

a bramble path," Scorch laughed. "What are you doing here, Raven?"

The black she-cat raised her head and looked at her in surprise, "I see you're doing well, Scorch. I thought you'd still be moping around."

Scorch flinched, the last time she'd seen Raven she had been moping, about Painted's death. And although it still stung to think about it, she could at least feel the sun on her fur and the wind in her whiskers as she mourned. "I just needed a little time to myself," she mewed quietly.

"Well, we're going to let you two catch up and take this prey back to camp," Boulderfall interrupted, picking up Scorch's dropped squirrel.

"Are you sure this cat is okay?" Spiritstorm eyed Raven warily.

"She's okay, just don't hunt or anything, got it?" Boulderfall mewed.

Raven waved her tail and the patrol departed. Scorch turned back to Raven, "But, what are you doing here? You don't really have a habit of trekking through forests just for a casual visit," Scorch mewed, padding alongside Raven on a trail to the lakeshore.

"Well," the black she-cat started, "I wanted to see how you've been doing since it's been nearly half a moon since I last saw you. But you're doing much better," Raven sighed, her shoulders relaxing as they left the forest and padded down the grassy slope to the lake's pebbly shore.

"I'm sorry I haven't been back to the camp," Scorch apologized, guilt pricked her and her ears felt hot with embarrassment. "Um, about where Painted's buried..."

Raven waved her tail, "Don't worry about that. Mira had a guess where you may have laid her to rest and I went there a few days ago. It was very brave of you to get her out of WindClan territory," Raven looked at her, amber eyes glistened with gratitude, "Thank you."

Scorch ducked her head, she still felt bad about having left Painted there in the first place. But at least she had managed to give the she-cat a proper burial eventually. "You said you went alone? What about Mira and Jump?" Scorch asked, thinking of her old friends. She missed Mira's kindness and Jump's grumpiness, it felt nostalgic to think of them even though it hadn't even been a moon since she last saw them.

Raven's tail curled over her back in sudden happiness. "Well, that would have been a bit difficult now that Mira's a mother."

"She had her kits?!" Scorch bounced on her paws, words bubbling on her tongue."That's so awesome! Are they cute? How is Mira handling them? What are their names? What do they look like? Is Jump being a good fath-"

"Whoa, slow down," Raven purred, obviously as delighted as she was. "That was the main reason I came here, to tell you that. If you want, you can come see them right now," the black she-cat offered, waving her tail toward the distant pine forest.

"Right now?" Scorch looked at the oak forest uncertainly. No cat had given her permission and if she left now, no cat would know where she had gone. *But*, she reasoned, *I've already gone on patrol once, surely they can spare me for a while. And I really want to see Mira's kits!* "Okay!' Scorch looked up, "Let's go!"

Side by side, they turned on the rim of the lake and loped toward the hazy pine forest. Scorch's paws skimmed over the sand and pebbles, the sun warming her back and the spirit of joyous anticipation overwhelming her like a hollow overflows with rainwater.

Soon they had passed from ThunderClan's shoreline to ShadowClan's and tall, somber pine trees replaced the budding, lively oak and ash trees. But to Scorch, it felt familiar and she relaxed as the shadows slipped over her pelt and the needle flooring muted her pawsteps.

"It looks just like I remember it," Scorch sighed, The only difference was the lack of the white flooring. But, she found, the dark golden-

brown pine needles and sparse greenery suited it better. She looked at Raven, "How is the Clan doing?"

Raven glanced at her, "They're doing fine. RiverClan is even more antsy about moving back to their own camp. They've even started sending patrols to ready to camp for moving in. But Sunstar wants to wait until there is at least a plan to defeat Pinefur."

Scorch nodded, "A smart decision. But I don't think you can depend on ThunderClan and WindClan to take the first step on their own," she added tartly.

Raven looked surprised, "Doesn't WindClan want their camp back?"

Scorch nodded, "But ThunderClan doesn't want to help them," she growled, her tail flicking with annoyance at their insolence. "Well, they'll own up to it eventually. How about you? Are you a real warrior of ShadowClan now?" Scorch asked earnestly, the she-cat had mentioned it before. "And what about the other rogues?"

Raven flicked her ears warily. "Hawk became Hawkwing and joined RiverClan. And Nightshade joined ShadowClan formerly. Storm hasn't done anything, I think she's still waiting for Shade to come join- how is he doing, by the way?"

Scorch shrugged, "He's doing alright, he seems annoyed that he's still separated from his family, but I'm sure it'll all work out for him."

Raven nodded, "Anyways, all the other rogues joined the Clans: Regin is now Snoweye, Sharp is Sharpcry, Sky is Skylight, Parsely is Parselytail, Stoat is Stoatfoot, Mullen is Weaselfur, and Natalie is Silverpool."

"Wow!" Scorch curled her tail over her back, "They're all real warriors now. Did they all join RiverClan?"

Raven shook her head, "Weaselfur, Sharpcry, and even Snoweye preferred to stay in the ShadowClan camp. The rest wanted to stick with Sunstar though, it seems."

"What about Mira and Jump? Are they joining the Clans?" Scorch

wondered. The two had seemed to want to go back to their home on the beach, but now with kits, it seemed prudent for them to stay with the Clans for at least the next six moons.

Raven looked away, "You'll find out soon enough, there's the camp up ahead." The ground sloped down into a hollow and a gorse barrier blocked the way except for a small entrance beyond a wall of ivy. Raven led her through the familiar entrance and Scorch blinked as she padded into the camp.

The atmosphere was quiet and content, a few rays of sunshine penetrating the thick cover of pine trees and lighting up the needle carpet. Cats shared tongues in the most reclusive shadows and a few curious but non hostile gazes turned her way.

Raven led her to the bramble nursery den and Scorch waved her tail at the few greetings called out to her. "Go on inside, I'll wait out here," Raven mewed, waving her in.

Scorch nodded and slipped past her into the dimly lit bramble den. "Who are you?" a tiny voice greeted her and she looked down to see a tiny dark brown tabby tom kit staring up at her with impossibly round eyes as he tottered on impossibly stubby legs.

"Darkkit! Come back here right now," Newtlight scooped up the little kit by the scruff and dropped him in her nest, licking his head fur smooth.

"But who is that?" the little kit mewled again, peering at her curiously.

Scorch purred as another kit sat up in the nest, raising her tiny head, "What are you shouting about?" the kit mumbled, blinking sleep from her eyes.

"These are your kits?" Scorch mewed, leaning over Newtlight's nest to stare down at the two littermates.

"Yep," Newtligth purred, pride shining in her gaze. "Darkkit and Mintkit," she touched the tom and she-kit.

"Mintkit looks just like you," Scorch giggled, the little she-kit looked

up at her wonderingly. Mintkit had the exact same tortoiseshell fur as Newtlight.

"Yes, but she has her father's eyes. Just like Darkkit," Newtlight purred and swept her tail over the kits, curling down with them, deaf to their complaints.

"Is that you, Scorch?" She turned at the sound of her name and saw Mira lift her head in the back of the den, amber eyes heavy with exhaustion but full of love.

"Yes," Scorch purred, quietly, carefully stepping over to Mira's nest. "How are you feeling?" Scorch asked, brushing her muzzle against Mira's.

"Never been better," Mira purred, "Come look at them."

Scorch leaned over into the nest, spotting three tiny kits curled at Mira's belly, even smaller than Newtlight's who weren't even half a moon old yet. "They're so tiny," she whispered, carefully stroking them with a paw. "Have you named them yet?" she asked, looking up at Mira who was gazing at her kits with rapture.

Mira nodded, touching the first, a pale gray tom kit. "This one is Echokit," she mewed. Then touched the middle one, a fluffy white and calico she-kit, "This one is Splashkit." The last one was a pale yellow tom kit with black stripes, "This is Beekit."

Scorch purred, a tingling sensation running through her, almost like sunshine was rushing through her veins. "They're precious," she purred. Then she realized, "But those are Clan names," she glanced questioningly at Mira.

"That's right," Jump mewed, coming in from behind her, "We've decided to join the Clans, since it looks like this is going to be our kits new home."

"Really?" Scorch couldn't decide whether to be delighted or sad, since that would mean they wouldn't come with her to find her parents. *But these kits are more important, and I'm not leaving tomorrow or anytime soon*. "Did you join ShadowClan?" Scorch

asked.

Mira shook her head, "We decided to join RiverClan. I miss seeing the sunshine and I don't hate getting my paws wet."

Jump screwed up his face in a disgusted expression, "Speak for yourself. But I bet I'll get used to it," he sighed.

Scorch laughed, "You two are getting along as well as ever."

Jump prodded her in the sides, "Yes, but I can't say you look the best I've ever seen you. Are you eating alright?" he asked.

Scorch blinked, looking down at her limply ragged fur. She could just barely see her ribs beneath her fur, but there was also more muscle there, thanks to her trekking around all day long. But getting up early and staying up late was taking a toll on her, and she shuffled her paws nervously. "I'm eating just fine, just keeping myself busy," she mumbled.

Mira blinked at her sympathetically, "It's not your fault that Painted died."

Scorch felt a thorn prick at her heart, even if that were true, Leafpaw's and Featherpaw's death were on her shoulders now. She dipped her head, "I'm getting over it," she murmured.

Mira nudged her gently, "Don't worry about it. Just live life happily like she wanted you to and you're fulfilling her wishes."

Grief pressed on her chest, "I'll try," she promised. Getting to her paws, she stretched, "I should leave. It'll take a while to get back to the camp," she mewed.

"You're not staying here?" Mira asked.

Scorch shook her head, "No, I have to get back. They need me more than these cats do." She padded back out of the den, waving her tail at Newtlight and stepping back into the camp. Raven got to her paws and nodded at her.

"I'll escort you to the border, just to make sure you make it there

okay," she mewed. Scorch nodded, feeling tired and looked around the camp longingly. Here, no cat thought she was insane. Here, no cat thought she was useless. Here, no cat would look at her with suspicion. It was warm and gentle here, but she was choosing the hornet's nest over it, why? For the hornets themselves.

She sighed and turned to the entrance, slipping out as quietly as she had come in, Raven following close behind. "It must be nearly sun-high by now, they'll be missing me any moment now," Scorch mewed, not really caring about how much trouble she might end up in.

"Well, then, we better get moving," Raven mewed, taking the lead and dashing across the pine forest floor. Scorch followed her, willing her paws to carry her swiftly, but she hadn't eaten at all that day and her paws thumped against the ground, slowing her down.

"There's the border," Raven called, pausing up ahead to look back at her. Scorch nodded, trying to catch her breath as she wheezed besides the black she-cat. "Scorch?" she raised her head and saw Raven staring off into the distance, "Do you ever feel like you aren't where you're meant to be?"

Scorch tilted her head to the side, considering. Did she feel that way? Scorch stiffened as she was swept away into a mirage. She stood on a snow-covered summit, nothing but the blue sky above her and white covered peaks around her. The fierce cry of a bird echoed above her head and at the same time that she was involuntarily lifting her head to look upward she concentrated on tearing herself away from the mirage.

She opened her eyes back in the pine forest with Raven beside her, her panting just slightly increased. But now she was even more tired and Raven was still waiting for an answer. "No, I feel like I'm here as a result of my choices, and this is where I am meant to be." It was how she truly felt, she was exactly where she needed to be, trying to do exactly what she should be doing.

Raven nodded slowly, her amber eyes unfocused and hazy as if she were seeing something very different than the brown and green forest. "Well, good bye Scorch," the black she-cat dipped her head.

"Yeah, I'll see you later," Scorch purred, stepping across the border. Raven's tail snaked out and wrapped around her neck as the she-cat pressed against her. Scorch stopped, looking back as the she-cat nuzzled the top of her head. "What's wrong?" Scorch asked.

Raven gave a shuddering breath and released her. Scorch looked back at her curiously, meeting the amber gaze which shone with uncertainty. "Nothing. Just, good luck, Scorch."

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Scorch passed back underneath the leafy trees, blossom petals and seeds from trees filling the air with their fresh scent. Between the lazy hum of the forest and the comfortable warmth that sat over her like a fog, Scorch couldn't imagine anything better than curling up in a patch of soft grass and sleeping the day away.

But I can't do that now, I'm living with the Clans. I can't wait to be a rogue again! The freedom she'd once possessed when living with Painted and the others was a bright memory compared to the oppressive rules and scrutiny she was subject to now. *A cat can't hardly breathe in that camp of theirs!*

Then she paused, considering, *Well, at least in ThunderClan's camp, ShadowClan's is much better.* The bramble barrier loomed up in front of her and, with a resigned sigh, she brushed her way into the clearing. As the sudden sunlight glared upon her, two cats nearly jumped on top of her.

"Where have you been?" The demanding voice belonged to Leopardspot, the black spotted golden she-cat narrowed her eyes and her tail lashed behind her in irritation. Icewhisker stood solemnly besides the aggressive she-cat and several others gathered around them. Apparently, they weren't alone in this interrogation.

Fighting down annoyance and panic, Scorch met their hostile gazes steadily, "My friend, Raven, told me that another friend, Mira, had kitted. I went to see her kits."

She thought she saw a gleam of disappointment in a few gazes and the hostile feeling pressing around her subsided to a despondent

suspicion. Scorch looked around and spotted Boulderfall standing in the back of the crowd, staring at her with a shadowed gaze. But when she tried to catch his eye, he looked away. Worry ate at her as she fought to disperse the inquisition.

"Wait, doesn't that Mira cat live in the *ShadowClan* camp?" Scorch scowled as Flameclaw pushed his way to the front of the cats. He looked down on her, green eyes disdainful as he blocked her view of Boulderfall.

"What do you think you're doing?" she spat, glowering up at him.

"Protecting my Clan," he retorted. "You can't keep visiting ShadowClan like you're a part of *them* when you live with *us*."

Scorch lashed her tail, "That was only the first time I've visited them. And one of my closest friends doesn't have kits every day! Of course I was going to go see her, and what's the harm with that?"

"The harm is you could give away our secrets to them and then they'd have an advantage on us in battle," Flameclaw argued, a few cats nodding their heads in agreement.

"I didn't even hardly speak to any cat! And all we talked about were the kits. Really," she mewed, taking a deep breath to try to calm herself. "You're making a big deal over nothing."

But that didn't smooth pelts, Flameclaw's lip curled back in a snarl, "Our Clan's safety is not 'nothing.'"

Fury rose like a pillar of fire, "If you really cared about your Clan's safety, you would find a way to beat Pinefur instead of worrying about fears based on nothing!" With that, Scorch shoved her way through the grumbling cats to get to Boulderfall, but when she reached where he was, he had already gone.

Distressed and on the brink of tears now that the fury faded and left her feeling hollow, she wearily pushed her way toward the apprentices den, hoping to catch some sleep before facing the Clan again.

The den was empty and the moss floor and sheltered cave provided

thick enough walls to protect her from the inquiring eyes of the camp. With a grunt and a sigh she flopped down in her nest at the back of the den and stared dejectedly at Boulderfall's nest. Now that he was a warrior, he wouldn't sleep in here anymore and they weren't likely to let her into the warriors den. *Not that I would get any sleep there anyways, not with all those cats staring at me as if I were plotting their demise.*

"You should leave tonight," the growl was low and came from the entrance. Scorch looked up at the shadowed figure. By scent, she could tell it as Flameclaw.

"You won't scare me away," she answered, curling tighter into her nest.

"I'm trying to protect you. And Boulderfall. If you leave now, you both can escape safely. But if you stay for much longer... well, I don't think it'll be pleasant for either of you." The silhouette turned and whisked away back to camp.

Scorch snorted, wishing she could just ignore his words. But what if he were right? Things were getting worse between her and the Clan. What if something bad did happen and the Clan blamed her? Would she drag Boulderfall down with her if that happened?

Filled with uncertainty and fear, she settled down to a fitful sleep broken only by her own nightmares.

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Shrieks of pain sliced through the ringing silence. Scorch stood in the middle of a hazy dark gray fog, tree limbs curling like claws in the mist over her head and the scent of rain fresh on her tongue. The grass, cold and slick, silenced her pawsteps as she stepped forward, searching for the owner of the screams.

Growls and hisses exploded behind her and she whirled around, a withering mass of cats tearing at each others throats tumbled across the forest floor. She noticed that some of the cats seemed to be ThunderClan, but she didn't recognize anyone in particular. "Wait! Why are you fighting?" Scorch's words were drowned out by the

fury of battle.

Scarlet drops flew through the air, splashing bright crimson on the fog covered ground. Her throat clenching as the red droplets bubbled, growing into wide pools of blood that stained the ground and released a vile stench that turned her stomach. Scorch took a step back, trembling at the forces of wrath and fear that overwhelmed the area.

It was so real, so intense, so frightening. But Scorch knew it was just a dream- she could feel the rush of the world in her veins. And she tore herself away from the horrible scene, curling her senses inside of her and blocking out all connection of her mind to the outside world.

Panting, Scorch blinked open her eyes. Gray morning light filled the apprentices den and the air was still chill from the nighttime. Sitting up and giving her fur a few licks to calm herself, she saw that all the other apprentices were sleeping. *But it looks hazy,is there fog out?* She shivered as she remembered there being fog in her dreams.

Scorch stiffened, her mirages had entered her dreams again. But, last time when she had dreamed it, it had occurred in the future- not the past. *Does that mean it will happen in the future, or even is happening now?* She got to her paws and paced out of the den, her breath stolen as she saw the camp covered in thick fog.

Fear thrummed in her chest, this was too great a coincidence. Only a few cats were waking up so early, but the dawn patrol had already left. And she knew that in her dream, the place the cats had been fighting was near the WindClan border.

Did they get attacked by Pinefur? Should I risk stirring every cat up over nothing, or do I risk not doing something? For a few moments, she balanced between the two options. She could go check it out by herself first and not worry any cat. But if the dream had prophesied correctly, there wouldn't be any time to come back for help if it were needed.

Making up her mind, Scorch dashed across the clearing to

Sunstorm. The ginger tom was the most senior warrior, so he was in charge of organizing cats for the moment. "Sunstorm, did you send the dawn patrol out already?"

"Yes, they left a little while ago. It's tough to tell when sunrise is with all this fog, though," he mewed. He looked down at her patiently, waiting for her to continue. Even though he wasn't an unkind cat, he treated her like he would an imprudent kit.

"I think you should send a patrol of cats after them to make sure they're alright," she waited in torturous embarrassment as she saw the next question coming.

"Why?" She stared at him, wishing he could just do it without asking questions. *Not that I would do that either.*

"I-I had a dream," Scorch could already feel her ears heating up.

"A *dream*?" Sunstorm purred, looking amused. "Or a nightmare?" He shook his head, "They are all fine, go back to your nest until it's time to work," he mewed.

Scorch wanted to obey him, to escape his patronizing gaze, but what if the patrol was fighting for their lives at this very moment? She knew she'd hate herself if she allowed herself to shirk from her knowledge. "I know it doesn't seem likely, but, please, just-"

"We should go," a voice spoke over her stammering. Her heart leaped with joy and she felt a purr rising in her throat as Boulderfall stepped up besides her.

Sunstorm looked at the young warrior, considering. Then the orange tom dipped his head, "Grab another cat and we'll go check it out."

Scorch leaned toward Boulderfall, "Thank you," she whispered. He simply nodded and bounded to the warriors den, calling for another cat to join their patrol. Scorch waited by the entrance with Sunstorm, feeling very small besides the large tom and uncertain of what he thought to this sudden patrol.

Luckily, he spoke first. "Why do you think what you dreamed would

happen in real life?" he asked her curiously.

Scorch dropped her gaze to her paws, she wanted to ignore the question, but she felt it would be wrong to lie. She also felt that he had enough sense to keep a secret. "Sometimes my dreams come true. In my dream, there was a lot of fog, and when I woke and it was foggy I just thought it might be one of those times," she mumbled.

"Really?" Sunstorm didn't sound condescending anymore, there was true curiosity in his voice. "Our medicine-cats have dreams like those. They are sent by StarClan. But I've never heard of a rogue doing that," she wriggled under his searching gaze.

She was rescued as Boulderfall bounded over to them with another cat at his side. Her heart fell as she saw Flameclaw, his green eyes raked over her scathingly. Clearly, Boulderfall had told him why he was being dragged out of his nest so early in the morning.

"Let's go, Scorch, lead the way," Boulderfall mewed, instantly taking charge. Scorch nodded, whisking out of the entrance and not hesitating to follow the trail toward the WindClan border. The fog billowed around them and muffled their sounds, an almost eerie sense coming down upon them.

The race was a great excuse to not speak, but Scorch could feel Flameclaw's annoyed gaze on her back and Sunstorm's serious one. Scorch slowed as she neared the place where the fight had taken place in her dreams. Stepping off the trail, she pricked her ears and tasted the air.

"I don't hear anything," Flameclaw grumbled.

"The fog muffles sound and seals scent, we'll have to find the patrol to make sure they're okay," Sunstorm mewed.

Scorch's heart thudded in her chest as she led the way closer to the clearing, she could almost hear the screams pounding against her ears. She stumbled to a halt as they entered the clearing where the drops of blood had become puddles.

She stopped and stared, everything from the tops of the trees to the blades of grass was perfectly undisturbed. No battle had been waged here today, and Scorch got a sudden sick feeling in her stomach. She had been wrong, and it wasn't going to be a mistake overlooked by the Clan.

She shot Boulderfall a distressed look and he seemed to understand, for his gaze darkened as he turned to the others. "Nothing seems out of order, and in this fog, I think we should just go back to camp," he mewed. He was going to try to minimize the witnesses to her folly.

"Oh? Why the sudden change of mood?" Flameclaw shot her a nasty look.

"I don't think we should be too hasty. Let's go find the patrol- I think I caught a whiff of their scent- and make sure everything's alright," Sunstorm mewed, taking the lead. Scorch had no choice but to follow and live in anticipation of what was to come. *This will just make them think I'm crazier, oh, what am I going to do?*

Sure enough, they came upon the patrol- albeit a bit spooked at their sudden appearance in the fog- but unharmed nonetheless. "What are you doing out here?" the leader of the patrol, Leopardspot, asked.

"Scorch had some concern about your safety," Sunstorm purred. Now that she had been proven wrong, his interest had fallen back to his previous amusement

Flameclaw scowled, "I was pulled from my nice warm nest just because that kit can't tell nightmaares from reality."

Scorch bit her tongue, she couldn't say anything, not this time. The best choice of action was to not protest and admit her mistake. But it was impossible for her to meet the eyes watching her and she could feel a rising feeling of irritation from the cats at her folly.

"Well, we're done here. Let's all go back to camp," Sunstorm mewed, the patrols joining and heading back toward camp. Scorch fell in the back, plodding behind the others with her head and tail down.

She glanced up when she saw Boulderfall by her side. A frown marred his face and she could feel the warmth from him turning cold. "I'm sorry," she mewed, feeling helpless about what to do.

Boulderfall gave her a scorching look and she flinched. "Don't you remember what I said yesterday? You're supposed to be keeping a low profile and showing the Clan that you can act rationally! There are no secrets in a Clan, now every cat will know that you think your dreams are real. This is disastrous!"

Scorch looked down, abashed, "It was just so real, I couldn't just ignore it! What am I supposed to do?" she begged, looking up at him hopefully.

But he curled his lip, "I don't have a clue. But you need to get yourself under control because I'm not going to keep sticking my neck out for you just so you can bring me down with your reckless decisions. You're on your own now," he bounded up to Flameclaw's side.

Scorch stared after him, beseechingly, waiting for him to realize what he had just said. But cold dread gathered in her belly as Boulderfall ignored her the rest of the way back to camp. Only Flameclaw glanced back at her, to spare her one devious smirk.

Chapter 53: Specter

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Scorch plodded along the dirt track, kicking up clouds of dust as she dragged her paws. Through the trees, the sun shone down uncomfortably warm on her dark fur and silhouetted the budding leaves on the ground around her. The bright green grass failed to catch her eye and she ignored the flitting butterflies above her head.

The disastrous start of the day had left her feeling hollow and exhausted, and the sun had not even yet climbed clear of the trees. The fog had been burned away and the covering of clouds had scurried away as if to shine light upon her folly.

When she had gotten back to camp with the patrol, Flameclaw and Leopardspot had been quick to spread the news of her foolishness. Most cats had laughed and forced her to endure some harmless jests, but others had stared at her with darkness in their gazes. It was clear that they wouldn't be willing to laugh her mistake off so easily.

But that wasn't what had brought this gloom down upon her. Boulderfall had avoided her completely; he hadn't spoken a word to her, nor had he spared her a glance. The pain ran deep at his sudden aversion to her, she couldn't help but wonder how long he planned to keep it up. Or worse, if he really was done with her.

Fear chilled her and despite the new-leaf heat, she shivered. Striding onward firmly, she argued with herself that Boulderfall wouldn't really abandon her. *He just wants a break from me in the eyes of the Clan. He'll come back when I earn the respect of the Clan. And we will be friends forever. But, will he really be my friend ever again? Can I trust his word? He told Flameclaw he couldn't abandon me, and now he has. And do I really want a friend whose friendship depends on my position in his Clan?*

She mulled over the questions until her mind was worried sick and her belly had turned into knots. Scorch stopped as she came to the base of a familiar steep incline, broken spots of grass clung stubbornly to the crumbly dirt. Deep channels in the dirt showed where the rain had washed the earth away and deposits of soil littered the ground around her.

A bit of her depression dispersed as she spotted Sonya standing on the top of the hill, waving her tail wildly to get her attention. Scorch purred, at least Sonya was still her friend. *And I have Mira, Jump, and Raven if I get driven out of ThunderClan*, she reminded herself.

Scorch bounded up the slope, her paws kicking loose dirt down behind her as the sun shone bare on her back. It wasn't too hot anymore, it was lazily warm and she touched Sonya's delicate nose gently, savoring the warmth in her bright green eyes. Such a difference from the cool, detached looks she got in ThunderClan!

"You seem to be in a good mood," Sonya purred, taking a step back to survey her. "As scruffy as usual," the white and ginger she-cat laughed.

Scorch ducked her head down and smoothed her wild fur with a few embarrassed licks. "I didn't have time to groom earlier," she mumbled.

"You never have time! Scorch, you need to giver yourself time to take care of yourself," Sonya mewed, blinking at her with affectionate worry.

"I am taking care of myself," Scorch defended herself, "I just haven't been taking care of my pelt."

"And that's part of you," Sonya mewed briskly, sitting down beside her and starting to pull out knots with her teeth. "Come on, you can help to," Sonya mumbled around her fur.

Scorch started to wash herself, smoothing and pulling and smoothing again. She relaxed under the expertness in which Sonya groomed her fur. Reflecting, she realized Sonya's fur was long and

fluffy but it was always crisp and clean. *If she ever gets dirty, it probably takes forever to groom her fur! She probably never gets dirty.*

"If you two are done," Time growled, standing over them. His form didn't cast a shadow over them, though, and the sunlight appeared to flow around him.

"What am I learning today?" Scorch asked politely, standing up and admiring her sleek red and black fur.

"Oh! Your fur sparkles in the sunlight!" Sonya exclaimed, ignoring Time and stroking Scorch's fur with a soft paw. "You should always keep your fur looking so nice," Sonya nodded to herself and Scorch thanked her graciously. "Now then," Sonya mewed, turning to Time who was watching them with an annoyed look, "What new technique are we teaching today?"

Time rolled his eyes and circled them, "We are going to start teaching her how to gain control over what mirages she sees."

Sonya nodded and Scorch glanced between the two curiously. "What do you mean by control which mirages I see?" she asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Time snapped impatiently. "We're going to teach you how to use your power so that you can pick and choose what mirages appear. At the moment, they are choosing themselves, but that's going to change," Time mewed, stopping in front of her.

"So if I want to see a specific cat, I'll be able see them?" Scorch asked, *does that mean I would be able to see Painted?*

Time nodded, "Yes," he mewed slowly, "But that is more advanced and it'll take a while to get to that point. For now, you will learn to see a particular event. For example, if you want to see a cat sleeping, you will be able to see a mirage of one. This will grow so that you can see very specific events- like a certain battle- than specific cats and eventually you'll be able to find a certain cat at a precise time doing a distinct thing."

Scorch's mind whirled at the thought of seeing not random mirages,

but ones she wished to see. "But I've already done a few of those things before. When I was very young, I wished to see a cat hunting, and I saw it. When Leafpaw died, I wished to see her, and I did. Back at Painted's home, I wanted to see when her family was driven out, and I saw it. And at the old battlefield, I wanted to see when Pinefur won, and I did. Can't I already do most of those things?"

Time rolled his eyes, "You did all that stuff before your power increased. Back then, you had almost complete control, even though you did not understand it. Now, though, you have to relearn it all. I assure you that right now, you wouldn't be able to see the things you wanted to so easily. But we're going to work so that you have better control than ever before."

Scorch shuffled her paws, it was true that her powers had been running wild, but surely she could still get them under control by herself. Thinking back to how hard it was to tear herself out of the current of mirages, she had second thoughts. *Before, there was never a torrent, more like I was sitting in a gentle pool. Why did things have to change?*

She sighed and sat down, closing her eyes. "What do I do now?" she asked.

"You're doing a fine job of making the mirages appear and disappear. But now, instead of only focusing on keeping yourself in control of them, you're going to need to seek for something in that flow of mirages," Time mewed.

"Try to find cats sleeping, or something else that's lazy and quiet. It's easier," Sonya advised.

Scorch took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting the world filled the space of her breath. The tide of mirages washed over her as large as ever, but now she was stronger. Instead of being dragged through it or having to stand on the side and watch it, Scorch stood in it and allowed the mirages to flow all around her, focusing and searching.

"Try to aim all of your senses on the same thing," Sonya whispered.

Scorch concentrated; listening for the droning purr, anticipating the soft warm fur, and the pleasant sight that would await her. The mirages changed around her, instead of being wild and random, they started to become uniform, slowly becoming more and more peaceful.

Cats sleeping, cats sharing tongues, cats grooming, cats watching the scenery or lazily dabbing at something. Scorch was filled with their quiet content and she searched fiercely for the image she sought. *There*! That was it, a queen with her kits.

Scorch grabbed hold of it with her mind and the other mirages disappeared as she stepped into this singular one. The queen was a pale gray tabby, her eyes round and milky and her purr a sweet lullaby for the three balls of fluff curled at her belly. *Kits*! Scorch could feel a purr rise in her own throat at the sight and as triumph crashed against her so did happiness.

Pulling herself gently away from the mirage she blinked open her eyes and purred happily at Sonya. The white and ginger she-cat curled her tail with pleasure, "You did it on your first try! At this rate, you'll have enough control!"

"Enough control for what?" Scorch asked, tilting her head at her friend.

Sonya laughed, "Enough control that you won't have to train so much, silly! And than you can concentrate everything on that Clan of yours. Now, let's do it again and, if you get it, then we can try searching for an event that took place on this hill."

Scorch looked at Time, "I can only see what happened in this immediate area, right?"

Time nodded, "But if your powers grow strong enough, you'll be able to see everything that happened in the surrounding area as well, possibly even the whole lake if you stayed here your whole life."

"Well, that's not going to happen," Scorch murmured, looking up at the bright sky. "Sonya, Time, when I leave the lake, will you come

with me?" she asked anxiously. She looked at their faces, if they didn't come, she wasn't sure she could leave the lake.

Sonya laughed gaily, "I told you before, I'd always be with you. I 'll follow you wherever you decide to go," Sonya nudged her shoulder gently but broke off, coughing.

Scorch looked at her worriedly, "I forgot to bring juniper berries!" she cursed herself and looked around, but the hill was bare of herbs and she couldn't see any at the bottom of the hill either.

"I'm fine," Sonya mewed, heaving a few deep breaths. "The pollen is just tickling my throat. But I'm doing better, really. The slight fever I had is gone and my nose is not running anymore," Sonya mewed.

Scorch inspected her closely and found Sonya was right, her nose was cool and crusted at the tip. The breath in Sonya's chest sounded labored, but it wasn't thick or wet so Scorch didn't press the issue. "Are you getting good sleep?" Scorch demanded, Sonya didn't look tired, but her eyes did look a little unfocused.

"Yes, I'm sleeping all night and most of the day. I think I just need to move around more," Sonya mewed.

"Well... if it gets any worse you'll have to come closer to the Clan so I can take care of you, and I will bring those berries tomorrow," Scorch promised.

"Alright, alright," Sonya purred, waving her tail. "Back to your training."

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Scorch stayed and trained all day. The camp wasn't tempting to return to and she worked vigorously, trying to forget about Boulderfall's words though they pierced her every time she had a moment of silence. Finally, as the sun was going down, she heaved a sigh and decided she ought to be going.

"Well, we had a good day of training. If we did this every day, you'd probably be done in half a moon!" Time mewed, pointedly.

Scorch waved her tail, "Once in a while is okay, but I can't do this every day. But I'll work on what we learned near camp and tomorrow maybe we can get to finding specific cats. I wasn't able to do that today."

Time tilted his head, "It's harder since you don't know of any cat who was here besides us. We could at first try to do it in a more familiar place or we could still do it here and simply look for cats with specific pelt colors and work from that," Time suggested.

Scorch shrugged, "We can do it either way, but I'm getting too tired to think about it tonight. Oh, but, I had one more question," she turned back to the cats tersely. "I once had a dream, and it felt like a mirage, I'd even see it with the other mirages when I trained with you. But it happened to me in the future."

Time and Sonya looked as confused as she felt and glanced at each other. Time gave Sonya a hard look and Sonya shook her head in response. "I'm only supposed to see the past, right? So why did I see the future?" Scorch pressed.

Time looked at her with a darkened gaze. "Scorch, whatever you saw, it couldn't have been from your powers. You don't have the ability to see into the future. And even if you could, you couldn't have seen your own future just as Sonya can't see hers or yours."

"But what else could it possibly be?" Scorch frowned.

"Well, you are living with the Clans right now. You're under the jurisdiction of that sky, so tread lightly if you choose to delve deeper into this," Time warned.

Scorch promised and started off for the ThunderClan camp, making it to the territory just as the last streaks of red disappeared into the night sky. *I should hunt, so that I at least earn my food for the day*. Dragging her tired paws across the forest floor, she was lucky enough to find a young rabbit sitting amidst some wildflowers.

Willing speed and skill to her paws, she crouched and circled around silently until she was downwind. The wind rippled the grass and the rabbit lifted its head, mouth still working as it chewed the

grass. Scorch laid her ears flat against her head, this would be an easy kill.

She pulled her paws closer into a pounce position and waggled her hindquarters, gathering power into her hind-legs. She soared closer to the rabbit, just a rush of wind in her ears. The rabbit startled and scurried off before she could land, only a few pawsteps away when she hit the ground.

Had Scorch been bigger, she could have caught with her paw easily, but she was too short to reach it and gave chase, the thrill of the hunt pulsing through her. A taste of wildness and freedom like the taste of the wind over the lake.

Through green fronds and over brown logs she gained on the rabbit, pushing herself harder as her mouth watered at the ravenous scent. Her vision narrowing in on the bobbing white tail. She skidded to a halt, sitting back on her haunches, as a pair of gray paws fell upon the rabbit and a pair of fangs ended its life.

Annoyance flashed through Scorch as she jerked her head up to scold the cat who had stolen her prey. But her words fell silent as she met the icy gaze. "You looked like you needed help," Moonfrost mewed, sounding unapologetic and even less helpful.

Scorch dipped her head awkwardly, "I almost got it. But, thanks." She looked around anxiously, were there anymore Clan cats around?

Moonfrost read her actions, "I came out alone," the she-cat stepped off the rabbit and prodded it with a paw. "You can take that back to camp, it was your catch, after all."

"But you were the one that killed it," Scorch grumbled, if a rumor got out that she was taking credit for other cats catches she would be dead. Scorch shook her head at her thoughts, *I never used to worry so much about such a simple thing!*

"Come on, we can hunt together for awhile if you want to catch something yourself. I like hunting by starlight anyways," Moonfrost mewed, pushing the rabbit into a fern bush to collect later.

Scorch nodded, her heart lifting at the prospect of hunting with another cat. But she felt weary as she fell in step with the dark gray she-cat. She couldn't read the senses she was receiving from Moonfrost and the she-cat's aloof expressions weren't giving her any hints either.

"I heard you got into some mischief this morning," Moonfrost commented.

Scorch's fur ruffled, "I was just taking some precautions!" She defended herself.

"I don't doubt that. But every cat is even more sure that you don't belong here now. They're saying that you're so sick and lonely that you can't tell dreams from reality. They want you to go back to ShadowClan," Moonfrost mewed, turning her cold blue gaze on her.

Scorch looked away, "I'm perfectly sane. And I can tell my dreams from reality. I'm not leaving until Pinefur is driven away from the lake!"

Moonfrost shrugged, "It's just what the others are saying. Since we have no leader, I doubt they'll take the initiative to actually do anything. To you, or to Pinefur."

"Then, they need a leader! Both Clans do," Scorch mewed, "The medicine-cats can go to the Moonpool and ask StarClan, that's what Flickertail did."

But Moonfrost shook her head, "They already have- they were told to seek out the *Fire of Spirit* or something else cryptic that's typical of StarClan. So, for now, we're left leaderless."

"But can't you just appoint a leader anyways?" Scorch asked, looking around at the shadows stretching further into the night.

"They could, but no cat wants to be leader. Pinefur will target and try to kill the new leader. And with the spy still quite possibly with us, it would probably happen before the cat could get his nine lives," Moonfrost explained."But why do you want a leader? Half the Clan wants you to leave and it'll be likely that you'd be driven out if

there is a leader."

"That doesn't matter," Scorch whipped her tail, stalking forward angrily, "As long as the Clans are moving forward to defeat Pinefur and reach freedom, I don't care what they do to me," she mewed fiercely.

She looked back as Moonfrost stopped behind her. In the dim gray light, Moonfrost's gaze was shadowed and her pelt blended in with the grayness of twilight. "Why do you care so much? Why do you fight so hard? Why are you always alone?" Moonfrost's voice trembled, from sadness or anger, Scorch couldn't tell.

But she gazed at the warrior she-cat steadily. "I fight because I am not alone. I may not be surrounded with friends and family all the time like the Clan cats, but I still fight for them. Painted died for this, so I'll keep fighting since she can no longer do it herself. And I fight for every cat like her, who died before the tyrants could be defeated."

Moonfrost looked at her with a blank expression, "But why. You're not a Clan cat, you're a rogue from far away. You only ever met the Clans because I ran away and you brought me back. Why go through so much trouble and pain for strangers that have only given you trouble."

Scorch waved her tail and continued on through the woods, "You can't always explain why you need to do something. You just need to do it and that's it. And I will do it; I won't leave until the Clans are free and I know my friends can be happy." she hesitated and turned toward Moonfrost again, "And I'd like to think of you as a friend, too, Moonfrost."

The gray she-cat looked stunned and met he earnest gaze slowly, the darkness brightening her blue gaze by contrast. "I don't see why I should be your friend. I don't know the first thing about you, and you don't know anything about me." Scorch's gaze fell. "But I think I would like to be your friend," Moonfrost mewed quietly, stepping up to her side and padding on further into the dark, "Now, let's do some hunting that would put even Flameclaw to shame."

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It was nearing midnight when the two she-cats finally entered the camp, laden with prey. The night was warm and there had been plenty of rodents scurrying about. Scorch proudly deposited her three mice and one shrew on the fresh-kill pile. Moonfrost had an even more impressive two squirrels, the rabbit, and two birds to contribute. But Scorch felt satisfied with her own catch and eagerly gulped down one of her mice to satisfy her rumbling belly.

She also felt warmth toward the reserved she-cat as Moonfrost began feeling warmth for her. Scorch was amazed by how happy this new development made her, *though I don't suppose it should, after all, Moonfrost is the one to that started all this.*

The calm of the night had invited the fog to come off the lake and invade the woods with smothering mugginess. Scorch bid goodnight to Moonfrost beneath the pale light of the moon and padded over to the apprentices den, thankful that only the eyes of the night guard were upon her.

She yawned as she stepped up to the dark entrance of the den, feeling tired and content from the successful hunt and the quiet talks with Moonfrost. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw a flash of silver and turned her head to follow it, spotting Featherpaw springing at the curls of fog that wreathed around the camp clearing.

Now that she knew Featherpaw was dead, the apprentice seemed to have taken an unearthly glow, her pelt glimmering with a silver shine of stars that sparkled around her. Her amber eyes glowed now from a different light, meeting Scorch's gaze and dazzling her. Featherpaw seemed to sense the change in Scorch's demeanor and left her game to pad over to her.

Scorch quickly looked around to make sure that the guard had returned to his duties and slunk in the shadows over to Featherpaw. "Featherpaw," Scorch murmured, forcing herself to meet the bright gaze.

"Yes?" the silver apprentice looked up at her, loneliness and sadness

seemed to dim the brilliance of the shine in her pelt and in her eyes.

"Is it true that you are dead?" Scorch asked quietly.

Featherpaw's gaze flashed with pain and she dropped her head, "So you know the truth now," the apprentice murmured sadly. "You don't know how happy it made me when you treated my like a normal cat."

"But," Scorch hesitated, wondering how to ask her question without seeming rude, "Why can I see you, and no cat else? And talk to you? And why are you here? Don't dead Clan cats go to StarClan?"

Featherpaw shrugged, "I do not know why you can see me, your guess is as good as mine. Skypool and Willowleaf seem to sometimes catch a glimpse of me but they can't hear my words and never approach me. As for why I am here," the silver apprentice looked away sadly, "No cat ever brought me home to StarClan, they left me here where I am neither dead nor alive," Featherpaw's lip quivered and her eyes misted.

Scorch frowned, "Can't you go to the Moonpool and find StarClan there?"

Featherpaw shook her head, "I've tried to go there so many times I've lost count, but every time I get to the top of the hill so that I can hear the water pooling in the Moonpool, I end up exactly where I started out from. I've given up hope of getting there on my own," Featherpaw crouched against the ground, looking even more dejected and miserable. "I'll probably spend the rest of eternity having to watch every cat in silence, no one ever noticing me."

Scorch felt a surge of anger at StarClan, *how can they leave an apprentice here on her own! Hasn't death been punishment enough for someone so young? What could they possibly gain from doing this?* Her anger melted into compassion and she nudged Featherpaw to her paws, surprised at how cold the she-cat felt. Almost like ice or stone that had never touched the sun.

"I'll help you get to StarClan," she vowed, looking the she-cat earnestly in the eyes.

Featherpaw stared at her in awe and gratitude brimmed in her amber kit-like gaze. "Do you really think you can get me there?" she asked in a timid voice.

Scorch nodded, "I'm sure of it, but it may take awhile. There has to be some cat in StarClan who knows something about why you were left here. And I'll ask them myself if I have to. But let's talk more about it tomorrow, you can sleep in my nest if you want," Scorch offered.

Featherpaw's eyes brightened, "Thank you, I miss feeling the warmth of fur, and you're the only one who can actually touch me."

Scorch led the way into the den and walked to her nest at the back of the den, careful to not disturb the sleeping apprentices. Featherpaw had no such worries, her paws going right through the tails she stepped upon. They curled down in Scorch's nest and snuggled up against each other.

Scorch ran a soothing tongue over Featherpaw's pelt, hoping that the she-cat, although dead, could still enjoy a good night's sleep. But as Featherpaw dozed, she couldn't help but feel puzzled. StarClan, from all her encounters and all the Clans cats said, were kind and wise. Why would they abandon an apprentice to silence and loneliness?

"Featherpaw?" she whispered, "Can you think of any reason you may have been left here, do you know nothing at all?"

Featherpaw stirred slightly, peeping open one amber eye at her. "No, I don't know. But I sometimes hear things that seemed to be whispered to me by no one."

"And what do you hear?" Scorch asked.

"I hear, *find the spirit of fire, ignite the Clans, and lead the Clans to the flame*. I don't know what they mean though. But, Scorch," Featherpaw looked at her, "I get the feeling it has something to do with you."

Scorch sighed, "I hope not, the Clan hates me enough already. If I

cause anymore trouble they might do something about it. Boulderfall's already left me," her heart ached at the words and the pain vibrated in her voice.

Featherpaw purred, "You're so silly. I think you should put more faith in your bonds. Boulderfall feels overwhelmed, anxious, scared, and frustrated. He wants the Clan to like you as much he does, but he can't figure out how, so he's trying to let you do it on your own. But I think you'll find very soon that he isn't pushing you away, he's putting his faith in you."

Scorch stared at the ghost apprentice in silence as Featherpaw fell asleep. She contemplated the words and smiled, feeling happy and a little bit better as she rested her chin on Featherpaw's cold fur and fell fast asleep. Dreaming again the dream from the night before with the fog, the fighting cats, and the drops of blood that became puddles. It would not leave her so soon.

Allegiances

ThunderClan/WindClan

ThunderClan Medicine-cat: Skypool- Silver-blue she-cat with darker gray-blue patches and white paws with green eyes

WindClan Medicine-cat: Willowleaf-Red she-cat with black stripes and green eyes

Warriors:

Sunstorm- Ginger tom with green eyes(Thunder)

Applefang- Skinny, tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes(Thunder)

Icewhisker- Light gray tom with blue eyes(Thunder)

Ivyfur- Silver tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes(Thunder)

Spiritstorm- Silver tabby she-cat with ice blue eyes(Thunder)

Leopardspot-Golden she-cat with black spots and green eyes(Thunder)

Wispheart-Dainty, storm-gray she-cat with lighter paws and ears; blue-gray eyes(Thunder)

Frostshine- Pale gray she-cat with white paws, tail-tip, belly, and face with blue eyes(Wind)

Cavepath- Brown tom with dark gray streaks and green eyes(Wind)

Mothbreeze- Tall, light brown she-cat with amber eyes(Wind)

Jumpblaze- Ginger tom with white stripe from between his eyes to his tail-tip and blue eyes(Wind)

Bouncepelt- Orange and white tom with amber eyes(Wind)

Redleap- Ginger she-cat with long tail and orange eyes(Wind)

Fireclaw- Ginger tom with green eyes(Thunder)

Moonfrost- Dark gray she-cat with ice blue eyes(Thunder)

Boulderfall- Stone gray tom with blue eyes(Thunder)

APPRENTICES:

Deerpaw- Skinny, tan colored she-cat with white spots and blue eyes(Wind)

Featherpaw- Silver she-cat with amber eyes(Wind) (dead)

Ravenpaw- Black she-cat with amber eyes(Thunder)

Gorsepaw- Gold-brown tom with brown eyes(Thunder)

Pinefur's Cats

Leader: Pinefur- Copper-brown tom with green eyes

Thunderclan Deputy: Goat- Shaggy dirty white tom with yellow eyes

WindClan Deputy: Spark-Red she-cat with gold paws and blue eyes

Warriors:

Spider- Brown tom with long legs and white underbelly, blue eyes(Thunder)

Moss- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes(Thunder)

Flick- Black tom with long tail and brown eyes(Thunder)

Molt- Brown tom with darker paws and ears and blue eyes(Thunder)

Thorn- Big, golden brown tom with blue eyes(Thunder)

Brighty- Bright yellow she-cat with green eyes(Thunder)

Coil- Black she-cat with twisted tail and yellow eyes(Thunder)

Bee- White tom with gold tabby stripes and blue eyes(Thunder)

Sunny- Bright gold she-cat with white paws and amber eyes(Thunder)

Paige- Cream she-cat with faint orange ringed tail and ears, blue eyes(Thunder)

Muddle- Dark brown tom with brown eyes(Wind)

Kit- Pale red she-cat with green eyes(Wind)

Wildeye- Lanky black tom with wide, bright yellow eyes(Wind)

Grease- Olive brown tom with pale brown eyes(Wind)

Snow- White and silver molted she-cat with amber eyes(Wind)

Egg- Off-white tom with blue eyes(Wind)

Prickle- Spiky sandy-brown she-cat with green eyes(Wind)

Bat- Thick, short-furred black she-cat with amber eyes(Wind)

Poppy- Yellow and brown she-cat with blue eyes(Wind)

Clam- Silver furred tom with pale yellow eyes(Wind)

Rogues

Scorch- Tiny red-orange molted she-kit with three black spots and dark green eyes

Raven- Long-legged black she-cat with amber eyes

Sonya- Small red-orange molted she-cat with white spots and light green eyes

Soot- Black she-cat with dark hazel eyes

Jet- Lanky black tom with brown eyes

Slate- Small black she-cat with blue eyes

Shale- Large black tom with one white paw and blue eyes

Shade- Black tom with silver paws and gray eyes

Amelia- Long-furred black she-cat with amber eyes

Wing- Small black she-cat with brown eyes

Crow- Lanky black tom with dim gray eyes

Jack- Black tom with white back paws and blue eyes

Snake- Slinky black tom with a long tail and dark amber eyes

Rita- Black she-cat with white ears and front paws and blue eyes

Storm- Black she-cat with stormy blue eyes. Mate- Shade

(KITS)

Fling- Black tom with a long, white-tipped tail and blue eyes(Storm)

Swish- Long-legged black she-cat with green eyes(Storm)

ShadowClan

Leader: Crowclaw- Black tom with pointed ears and amber eyes

Deputy: Thistlebranch- White, gray-brown, dull ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine-cat: Nightshade- Black she-cat with heather-blue eyes

Shadowripple- Black she-cat with faint stripes and green eyes

Frogfoot- Wide-pawed murky-brown tom with green eyes

Snoweye- White she-cat with gray eyes

Weaselfur- Tall brown tom with yellow eyes

Sharpcry- Gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Queens:

Newtlight- Ginger, white, tawny, and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Darkkit- Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes(Newtlight)

Mintkit- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes(Newtlight)

RiverClan

Leader: Sunstar- Big, dark yellow tom with orange eyes

Deputy: Willowwater- Gray tabby with black ear-tips and green eyes

Medicine-cat: Flickertail- Red-brown tom with cream dappled spots and amber eyes

WARRIORS:

Creekshade- Black she-cat with dark green eyes

Webclaw- Wiry gray tom with white paws, muzzle and blue eye

Hawkwing- Black tom with brown paws and yellow eyes

Silverpool- Thin, silver tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Parsleytail- Pale brown tom with white paws and green eyes

Skylight- Dark brown she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Stoatfoat- Tawny furred tom with umber eyes.

Flashstrike- Black she-cat with shimmering, soft fur and bright gray eyes

Jump- Small white tom with frizzy whiskers and a half torn ear, sharp green eyes

Queens:

Mira- Small, tabby gray she-cat with amber eyes

Echokit- Pale gray tom with blue eyes(Mira)

Splashkit- Small white and calico she-cat with amber eyes(Mira)

Beekit- Pale yellow tom with black stripes and sharp green eyes(Mira)

STARCLAN/ANCESTORS

Song- Tall, black she-cat with amber eyes

Rosewing- Pale red she-cat with dark brown paws and darker brown eyes. (Former RiverClan Deputy)

Seedtail- Brown tabby tom with hazy blue eyes. (Former ThunderClan Medicine-cat)

Softpaw- Pale gray she-cat with odd orange markings and cloudy blue eyes. (Former WindClan Apprentice)

Smokepool- Silver tom with black ears and hazel eyes. (Former ShadowClan Warrior)

Time- Tall black tom with bright red eyes

Chapter 54: The Apprentice

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For six days Scorch found herself followed the same routine. She met with Sonya and Time in the morning to train her powers- in which she made moderate progress. Then hunting all afternoon with Moonfrost- they continued to grow closer, though they quickly realized the only thing they had in common was the belief that Pinefur should be driven out as soon as possible. And finally, she spent her evenings alone with Featherpaw, during which she sometimes would practice her powers and other times talk with Featherpaw about getting her back to StarClan.

Every night was the same routine as well. The dream filled her nights with its wretchedness- the fighting cats, the fog, and the pools of blood were all she saw when she closed her eyes to sleep. And every morning before dawn she followed the patrol along the WindClan border before going to meet with Sonya and Time, to make sure they made it home safely without any cat knowing of her paranoia.

It was exhaustive, but Scorch felt happy to work with her friends and following the dawn patrol put her nerves at ease. The only shadow on her days was that Boulderfall continued to avoid her. And it seemed, to her irritation, that Flameclaw was always whispering words into his ears like a snake.

The sixth day ended like all the others, Scorch and Moonfrost entered the camp together just as the cats were turning to their dens for the night's rest. "I didn't catch much today," Scorch murmured, dropping and prodding her two small pieces to contribute to the food supply.

"You really haven't gotten used to hunting in a forest yet, you need to remember that there is a lot more undergrowth here than in the pine forest," Moonfrost mewed, dropping her own large catch on the fresh-kill pile.

Scorch sighed and looked around, wondering if Boulderfall was still up. She spotted him sitting outside the warriors den, he was watching her with narrowed eyes but looked away abruptly when she met his gaze. She didn't dare approach him, not with Flameclaw stretched out on his belly right besides him.

The orange tom noticed her and smirked, mewing something to Boulderfall that she couldn't hear, and then laughing. Boulderfall didn't laugh, but he looked amused and turned toward the warrior.

Scorch's fur prickled uncomfortably and she looked at Moonfrost who had observed the two toms as well. "What am I going to say to Boulderfall to get him to be my friend again, or at least start talking to me again?" she asked, scuffling her paws on the ground.

Moonfrost shrugged, "I don't know my brother very well, but he thinks very highly of the Clan's opinions of cats. The best thing would be for you to get in the good thoughts of the Clan, not that I could be of any help with that."

Scorch sighed, "I'm trying my best with hunting, and I help the medicine-cats when I have the time. But hardly any cat will talk with me, so I don't know how to show them they can trust me."

Moonfrost shrugged again and yawned, "Well, good luck with that. I'm going to my nest, see you tomorrow, Scorch."

"Okay, good night," Scorch mewed, watching the she-cat pad toward the warriors den. Moonfrost paused besides Boulderfall and Flameclaw and snapped something at them. Flameclaw rolled his eyes and Boulderfall stared at his paws, then they both headed into the den and disappeared from her view.

With paws itching to walk over to Boulderfall, she instead searched for the gleam of silver around the camp, spotting it above her head. Featherpaw sat on one of the rocks that led up to Highledge, watching the night sky yearningly as the stars appeared one by one in the midnight blue sky.

Scorch padded to the base of the rocks and stared up at the apprentice. "Hey, do you want to talk tonight?" Scorch asked

quietly, Featherpaw seemed so immersed in searching the sky that she wasn't sure if the apprentice wanted to be disturbed.

Featherpaw shook her head, then hesitated, "Scorch, I feel like I can almost read the sky," she mewed in a soft tone.

"What do you see?" Scorch asked, turning to look at the sky as well. The pale moon was waxing toward fullness and its white light illuminated the stars so that they sparkled like freshly fallen snow.

"I think I can see cats, and faces, and the future, and prophecies. But I don't understand it, I don't know what I'm seeing or how to interpret it. I feel lost when I look up there, and I wonder how I could ever join them," Featherpaw's face was drawn but her eyes were clear as she stared, captured by the radiance of the sky.

"Do you see my future?" Scorch sighed, sitting down and curling her tail over her paws. "I could use some good news about it."

"I can't really see anything, but I do see something happening here tomorrow. The Clan is going to change, I just don't know how," Featherpaw tilted her head, considering.

Scorch plucked at the ground, was that true or not? Was it going to be a good change or bad? Would it affect her? Endless questions with endless answers, Scorch shook her head, growing tired as the moon rose higher. "I'm going to my nest, you can join me when you're ready," Scorch mewed, heading for the apprentices den.

Curling down in her nest, she dreaded the plaguing dream and fell into a fitful doze, not quite sleeping but not fully awake. She was awakened by an icy touch on her shoulder. Scorch blinked open her eyes and looked up to see Featherpaw's glittering amber gaze.

"Scorch, get up, you need to see this," the apprentice whispered, even though no cat other than Scorch could possibly hear her.

Scorch got to her paws, stumbling a little as she found balance on her sleepy paws. "What is it?" she asked, trying not to yawn.

"Come see," Featherpaw whispered, leading her out of the apprentices den and toward the entrance. Featherpaw walked right

past the guard and Scorch muttered something about needing to take a walk. The guard, Ivyfur, nodded, but looked a little hesitant to let her go by.

Out in the forest, the chill of night pressed in like the overwhelming darkness. Shadows flitted here and there and Scorch felt the fur on her spine prickle as strange forest noises echoed around her. The bark of a faraway fox made her skin crawl and she startled at the twigs she cracked underpaw.

"Where are we going?" Scorch asked, trying to peer past the glowing apprentice. But walls of undergrowth limited her vision and she had to concentrate more on where she was putting her paws to avoid tripping than what was in front of them.

Featherpaw didn't answer, just motioned for her to be quiet. The apprentice stopped at the edge of a gully and Scorch saw that a little water ran at the bottom of it. This was the border with WindClan, the territory Pinefur currently held in control.

"Why are we here?" Scorch asked, looking at Featherpaw.

"I followed the spy out of the camp and overheard his conversation with Pinefur," the apprentice mewed. Scorch's fur bushed out and she looked anxiously over her shoulder. "Don't worry," Featherpaw assured her, "The spy is already back at camp and Pinefur left as well."

"But, who is the spy?" Scorch asked anxiously, which cat is it?

Featherpaw shook her head, "I don't think I should tell you that," the apprentice mewed awkwardly. "I'm dead, so I shouldn't really be telling the living such things. But I wanted to lead you here."

"But, why? You could have just told me this back in the camp. Not that you told me much anyways," Scorch grumbled, feeling tired now that she knew she had trekked through half the forest that night for nothing.

Featherpaw looked at her silently for a long moment before whisking around and disappearing in a glimmer of starlight. Scorch

scowled, the least Featherpaw could do was travel back with her! She sighed and turned to leave, but a faint scent carried on the night breeze stopped her.

She raised her nose to the wind; the scent was cat, but not Clan. A she-cat? It smelled familiar, but Scorch couldn't recognize it. Her pelt prickled, she had met lots of rogues and not many of them were fond of her. Scorch followed the scent along the gully, but it veered back into ThunderClan territory.

Her heart thudded as she saw where it was leading, she stepped into the clearing she'd seen ravaged every night for the past quarter moon. The grass glowed silver and the aspen trees that circled the clearing curled their branches up against the sky, the wood as white as bone.

"I always seem to run into you when I least expect it," a voice growled and the scent finally registered for Scorch.

Whirling around, she spotted the black she-cat stretched languorously on a white aspen branch, her amber eyes looking down at her disdainfully while she licked one of her forepaws.

"Amelia," Scorch growled, backing a safe distance away so that the she-cat couldn't pounce down upon her.

"Oh, so you do remember me! I'm touched, really, I am," the she-cat mocked her.

"What are you doing here, are you the spy?" Scorch accused.

Amelia twitched her tail, "Well, I am a spy. That was the position my father always gave me. But who, do you suppose, would I spy for now?"

"Pinefur," Scorch spat.

Amelia's feign lightheartedness melted, "The day I help that piece of crowfood is the day I die," snarled the black cat, her amber eyes bright with fury.

"Then what are you doing here?" Scorch asked in hostility.

"I'm observing. With Nightwing dead and NightClan dismantled, I have nothing else to do but sleep, eat, and observe," Amelia yawned, her tail waving below the branch.

"You don't hold any grudges you want to get revenge on?" Scorch mewed suspiciously.

Amelia rolled her eyes, "Granted that I'm not very fond of you, or any cat else for that matter, I think I'm getting more enjoyment out of watching you suffer amongst your so-called 'allies' than if I simply killed you."

Scorch scowled, "If you're doing such a great job observing, then who is the spy for Pinefur?" she demanded.

"Oh, I've seen him several times, the sneaky weasel. He's not a bad spy, but he could try to be a little bit more discreet. Being followed by a kit, and not even noticing! I never would have had that happen to me. But why should I tell you? I'm simply observing, I'm not going to interfere," Amelia mewed.

"And will this observing be put to an end if I tell the Clan that you're sneaking around?" Scorch challenged.

"Darling, you could try. But I doubt your friends would even take you seriously. They'd probably just think that you were seeing ghosts in the shadows," Amelia snickered. "But if you're so desperate for information, you should know that for the past seven nights Pinefur's cats have been scouting around here. And the spy relayed something about patrol schedules for this upcoming morning. I wonder what they are planning?" Amelia laughed and rolled on her back, kicking her legs up to the sky, "You can't imagine how much I love being a free cat! Enjoying all the stupid follies of you Clan cats. Now I can really see why my father wanted to destroy you all. You play the same game and chase your tails just to see who the first is to fall down."

Scorch glowered at the she-cat as she muffled her laughter and stood up. "Now, Scorch, I trust that you can be a good little kitty and in return for the information I just gave you, keep your trap shut about my existence? If you do not, who knows, I may just end

my grudge against you once and for all."

Scorch shivered as Amelia leaped away, disappearing in the tree tops and leaving her alone. She was sure of it now, the attack here would take place this morning, why else would Featherpaw lead her here? If she hurried, she could get back to camp before the dawn patrol left.

She hurried over the forest floor, tripping and stumbling in the shadows that loomed out of nowhere. She hissed as a thorn scratched her cheek and veered away just to trip over a log. Scrambling on, she ducked beneath a gorse bush and found her way back to the trail which was mostly clear of hazards.

Worries filled her mind like dark storm clouds. Would she make it in time? She picked up her speed. Would they believe her again? She slowed down. Would cats die in the fight? She moved faster. Could she trust what Amelia had told her? She almost halted.

Panting, she realized she was betting her whole reputation on the words of a murderess who seemed to live in the lies she told. *But this corresponds with my dream, except, there is no fog tonight.* Doubt pressed in on her, she doubted the Clans would forgive another one of her mistakes. Boulderfall, for sure, wouldn't. Her heart felt like a deadweight in her chest.

She looked up at the stars, twinkling in the gaps between the trees. *Featherpaw led me here, and I'm certain she's being guided by something... My dreams are being guided as well. I told Moonfrost I don't care what happens to me as long as the Clans end up safe and free, and I meant that. So if I get humiliated and driven out, if I lose all my friends in the Clan, if they gossip behind my back, as long as they're safe and healthy, I do not care.*

Scorch bounded along the path with new strength, almost not feeling the twigs that lashed her legs and the thorns that scratched her skin. The moon was setting as she entered the camp. Ivyfur was leaving her post for the warriors den, yawning and dragging her paws behind her.

The dawn patrol didn't go out yet, right? She hadn't seen them, but as

she drew in the scents at the tunnel, she found several cats had recently passed by. Uneasiness crawled under her pelt as she spotted Sunstorm stretching beside the warriors den, shaking his large head as he threw off slumber.

Would he heed her a second time? Or would he send her back to her den. Hesitation weighed on her, even if she was right, no cat would know that she could have done something to prevent the fight. Why should she go through all this to help cats that were trying to bring her down? She spotted Moonfrost emerging from the warriors den, looking up at the sky that was turning pale gray as dawn neared.

Scorch stiffened, she'd recognized one of the scents in the tunnel as Applefang, who was Boulderfall's and Moonfrost's mother. She couldn't risk them losing their mother as well as their father, she didn't want to see them sad.

Forcing herself forward, she confronted Sunstorm. "Yes, Scorch?" he asked, trying to look patient though his tail twitched.

"This time I'm certain that the patrol is going to be attacked," she announced, forcing herself to lift her gaze to Sunstorm's. She flinched at the wide green eyes, but met his gaze once more, staring at him steadily.

"Did you have another dream?" Sunstorm asked, his tone was light- he wasn't taking her seriously yet.

Scorch hesitated, she hadn't had that dream tonight- this time, she had another source. She shook her head, "I've had it several times, but tonight I found out that the spy told Pinefur about patrol schedules for the morning and were scouting out a good place for an ambush."

Sunstorm's gaze sharpened with interest and he leaned forward, "Do you know who the spy is?"

Scorch shook her head.

Sunstorm slumped back, disappointed. "Then how do you know this

if you didn't actually see the spy. Perhaps the spy met with Pinefur, but how do you know what they said? And I haven't had any reports of any Pinefur's cats leaving scents on our side of the border."

Scorch shuffled her paws, she could not say anything about Amelia, she had promised after all. And she didn't really want ThunderClan to know that she trusted the word of a murderess, they would think her crazy for sure. "A StarClan cat told me," she muttered. It was half true, Featherpaw was- as far as theses cats were concerned- a StarClan cat.

Sunstorm hesitated, giving her a perplexed look as he wondered whether to believe her or not. "Surely you aren't going to take her seriously *again*," Flameclaw's spiteful growl sounded as he padded out of the warriors den, sending her a glare hotter than ever before. Scorch took a step back from him, feeling intense frustration and fear churning within him. It seemed he was already in a bad mood this morning, it would be harder than usual to get along with him.

"Why not? Boulderfall talks as if she has a connection with StarClan," Moonfrost defended her, facing Flameclaw's anger with an icy demeanor.

"Nonsense, she's not a Clan cat! How could she have any connection with StarClan? If they were going to warn us, they would have told the medicine-cats. She's just making it up to get attention," Flameclaw turned his glare back on her.

"As far as I'm concerned, StarClan can choose whomever they like to share with! And any cat could see this is the last thing she wants to be doing," Moonfrost mewed, giving her a swift glance. Their voices had been rising and a few cats came out of their dens to see what the ruckus was.

"Calm down," Sunstorm stepped in between the two cats and gave them each a stern look. "Fighting between us isn't going to solve anything." He turned toward her, "Scorch, are you without a doubt sure that the patrol is in danger?"

Scorch stared at him, misery surging all around her. She wasn't

absolutely confident, but they wouldn't accept anything less. "I am."

"And you are willing to take responsibility for your mistake again, correct?" Sunstorm's tone was gentle and his eyes softened as he met her gaze. He didn't seem to like putting so much responsibility on a young cat, but he had to do so, to content the Clan.

"I am!" her voice was nearly a pitiful wail. She only wanted all the eyes on her to disappear, but they stuck to her, burning her with their sneers and their pity.

Sunstorm nodded, "If you are so sure, then we have no choice but to put our trust in you. I want a fighting patrol to go meet up with the dawn patrol. Any volunteers?"

There were some murmurs but no cat stepped forward, even Moonfrost seemed to be waiting for a cat to first raise their voice. "I will." Scorch whirled around, her gloomy desperation evaporating as Boulderfall pushed his way through the cats to stand beside her.

Flameclaw looked at him with disbelief, then shrugged, giving a long sigh and letting out all his anger with it. "I guess I have nothing better to do," he mewed, stepping over to Boulderfall's other side. Moonfrost silently joined them, standing beside her.

More cats joined them; Wispheart and Gorsepaw, Frostshine and Jumpblaze, Jet and even Wing joined the patrol. "It's been a while since I've had the opportunity to flex my claws," the black she-cat commented, stretching her legs one by one.

"There, go and make sure the patrol is alright. If you see any of Pinefur's cats, you know what to do," Sunstorm mewed, then he signaled to Redleap. The WindClan she-cat padded forward slowly, wondering if she should obey a ThunderClan cat. "If you can, I would like you to go with them. If there are too many enemy warriors, I want you to come back to get reinforcements. They say you're the fastest in WindClan, and in all the Clans, can you do that?" Sunstorm asked the young warrior. Redleap nodded, her orange eyes brightening at the praise.

"Alright, let's move," Boulderfall mewed, leading the patrol out.

Scorch stayed by his side, wishing to show him how happy she was that he believed in her, but he kept his eyes fixed firmly up ahead.

As they pounded through the forest, the light began to change. Fog rolled in through the trees from the direction of the lake, turning the forest thick and white around them. Bouldefall continued forward without hesitation and the cats all fell in behind him, as he held his head with an authority that seemed natural to him.

Scorch watched him closely as they raced through the forest. He had changed since they'd come to ThunderClan. He was no longer impatient and didn't lash out at his Clan-mates like he had to the ShadowClan and RiverClan cats. *Though, he still seems as prickly to me as ever,* she huffed.

But the way he moved, like he owned this forest, and the way he looked back at the cats, with pride and responsibility lighting up his gaze. It reminded her of Sunstar, it reminded her of a leader. *Could Boulderfall become a leader someday?* She wondered if he wanted to. He had always talked about ThunderClan as his family and home, and had been so anxious to save it.

Glancing at the other cats, they seemed content to follow Boulderfall and Flameclaw watched him with eyes full of admiration. *He really acts like Boulderfall is his entire world. Is that why he seems determined to turn the Clan against me? He doesn't want me to distract Boulderfall?*

Scorch shook her head, she couldn't tell what Flameclaw wanted, and she wasn't sure she wanted too. But she wasn't going to let him ruin their friendship, no matter what. Boulderfall led them toward the clearing that Scorch had led him to a quarter moon ago on that unfortunate morning.

Scorch felt a shiver, not yet sure if she wanted to hear the cries of battle or not. Boulderfall slowed as they neared, the fog was even thicker and muffled the sound as if they were surrounded by feathers. The ground was slick, wet from the heavy fog and the chill of a light drizzle misted in the air.

Scorch nearly jumped out of her skin as a shriek tore through the

quiet. She exchanged an alarmed glance with Boulderfall and the patrol bounded forward, no longer grumbling about how early it was. They raced toward the clearing where Scorch's nightmares had occurred over and over again, the shrieks piercing higher and a chorus of cries stunning the morning.

They veered off the trail and pushed their way through the ferns and long grass to enter the clearing. The battle raged, the dawn patrol hopelessly outnumbered by Pinefur's cats. Boulderfall let out a fearsome battle cry and leaped into the fray.

Scorch joined him, heart thudding in her chest as she saw scarlet drops flying against the foggy background. It was just like her nightmare, but worse, because she could feel the noise and chaos making her insides tremble. She darted in between the warring cats, skidding and slipping, wondering where to start.

Her paws slipped on the slick grass and she careened into a wall of brown fur. The scent told her it was an enemy cat, though the snarl and flashing claws on her ears could have told her that as well. The tom's blue eyes focused on her and a growl rumbled in his throat as he lunged for her, his darker brown ears pinned against his head.

Scorch slipped on to her side as she dodged his lunge and scurried back to her paws, just escaping his claws as he pounced. She spun around to face him and reared upon her hind legs, slashing her claws across his muzzle twice and skipping out of reach as he swung a paw at her.

Looking around, she saw that the two sides were about equally numbered. But they weren't all equally matched, her stomach churned as she saw Gorsepaw cowering at the mercy of a bright gold she-cat with white paws that were stained crimson from the repeated blows she struck at his kit-like face.

Abandoning her own opponent, Scorch dashed over to where the apprentice had been cornered against an aspen tree, the same one Amelia had been sitting upon. With as deep a snarl as she could muster, Scorch leaped onto the she-cat's back, burying her teeth in the scruff and dragging her claws over the golden back.

The she-cat screeched and bucked. Scorch lost her grip and hit the earth, stunned for a moment. The she-cat took the opportunity to press her bloody- but sheathed- paws against her throat. The enemy's amber eyes burned and Scorch gasped, choking and spluttering under the pressure to her throat.

Scorch wriggled, but couldn't get loose, and she could see that Gorsepaw was now facing the opponent she had deserted. Scowling up at the she-cat, Scorch gathered her back legs and pushed upward, moving the she-cat enough to dislodge her hold on her throat and surge upward, slamming into the she-cat's chin with the top of her head.

The gold cat stumbled backward, blood trickling out of her mouth and her eyes became cloudy with pain. Scorch seized her chance and leaped at the she-cat, grabbing the she-cat's head between her two paws and twisting around, pulling the cat to the ground. Then Scorch jumped on the exposed belly, scoring long gouges in the tender flesh.

The she-cat screeched as her fur turned from gold to maroon. Scorch's breathing grew heavy and she realized that the she-cat's flailing attempts to throw her off had left her with crimson spots as well, the pain stung and burned, but she clawed until the she-cat's strength had weakened. Then she drove her opponent off, sending her stumbling and crying, toward the border.

Turning back to the battle, she saw that it was coming to its conclusion. The final fights being decided. Wing was helping Gorsepaw finish her former opponent, one of them scratching at his muzzle while the other dove for his paws. Flameclaw was sending off a snarling enemy tom cat with a couple whacks at the retreating feline.

Boulderfall had a tortoiseshell she-cat beneath his claws, she struggled and spat, but he looked down at her with a look so icy it rivaled his sister's piercing gaze. He gave her a sharp bite to the shoulder and let her run away, yowling, into the bushes. Pinefur's other cats struggled away from their tormentors and followed her, disappearing in a trail of bloody pawprints.

Scorch sighed and sat down, feeling drained after the fury of the battle. Moonfrost padded up to her as the Clan cats gathered themselves together. "Are you okay? It looks like you've got a few nasty cuts there," the gray she-cat mewed, looking over her pelt, her eyes sparkling. Scorch thought she'd never seen Moonfrost look so excited except for after the battle that had driven Pinefur from ThunderClan.

"I'm fine," Scorch answered, shaking her pelt and getting to her paws, swaying slightly as cold numbed her legs. "What about you?" Scorch looked over Moonfrost, seeing she was missing only a couple pawfulls of fur and one bite on her tail that already had stopped bleeding. Looking around, every cat seemed capable to hold their own weight, though Frostshine was holding a bleeding paw off the ground.

"Let's get back to camp," Boulderfall's commanding voice rose over the excited murmurings of the battlefield.

Scorch saw Applefang pad up to her son, her one good eye glowing with warmth. "Thank you for rescuing us, we would have been in trouble if you hadn't shown up," the she-cat dipped her head and the others in her patrol nodded as well.

"Thank Scorch," Boulderfall mewed, "She's the one who foretold this and got us to come."

Scorch's fur grew uncomfortable as all the gazes in the clearing turned toward her. But it wasn't a bad feeling this time, admiration and thanks lit the eyes upon her. She raised her head to meet Boulderfall's gaze, it was warm and friendly, more so than ever before and her chest filled with happiness.

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The trip back to camp was gleeful as the Clan cats celebrated their victory over Pinefur. Scorch was right in the middle of it, cats praising her and complementing her intuitiveness- such a different tone than she had been given for the past moon.

Scorch escaped attention for a little while when they returned to

camp. The news of the battle and victory were quickly spread through the Clan, but the cats who had participated in the fighting were ushered to the medicine-cat den.

"So, have you had enough excitement for one day?" Willowleaf asked, pressing some herbs over her wounds.

Scorch sighed, "Yeah, I'm exhausted now," she mewed, yawning.

"Well, I doubt you'll be able to rest right away. The Clan seems to have completely reversed their opinion on you," the WindClan cat snorted. "Shows how fickle rumors are, huh?"

Scorch purred, the dark cloud that had always been forced over her in the Clan had vaporized like fog in the sun. Although she was a little overwhelmed by all the attention, at least the murmurs about forcing her out had disappeared. *And with this attack by Pinefur, it may be the perfect time to encourage them to drive him out since it is clear he won't go away on his own.*

Scorch thanked the medicine-cats for their help when they'd finished her wounds and padded out of the cool den, blinking against the sunlight that shone down warmly on her face, lighting up the retreating fog. Looking around, she could see the warriors showing off their battle scars and sharing their tales of glory with the Clan-mates that had stayed behind.

She purred at how easily they were able to forget the horror of the battle, she could still feel the last tremors of it in her belly. "Scorch!" she looked up at Boulderfall's voice.

He bounded up to her and looked down at her, his face was anxious and his eyes were apologetic. He looked exactly like how she'd known him in the pine forest. "I- I wanted to apologize for leaving you on your own for a while. I shouldn't have left you so quickly," he mewed, dropping his head almost to the ground.

Scorch hesitated, this was her chance to take back her friend. But something held her back, did she really want him to be her friend if she had to be in the good graces of the Clan for them to be together? *A friend is a friend, no matter what.* Besides, she couldn't

deny how happy she was to simply talk to him again. "There's nothing to apologize for. You were under a lot of pressure and I made things harder for you. A little space was just fine for a little bit, but I hope you won't do that to me again," she purred.

Boulderfall lifted his head, blue eyes glowing with relief, "Thank you, I won't do it again. I promise."

Scorch purred and brushed along his side, "I missed my best friend."

Boulderfall hesitated, staring down at her thoughtfully. "I did too," he mewed, decidedly. "But can I ask you one thing?"

Scorch nodded.

"Can you not get in a fight with Flameclaw? He doesn't like you, and you don't like him. I understand, but he's still my friend. So, can you two at least leave each other alone? I'm going to ask him to do that as well," he looked down at her, a frown in his blue eyes.

Scorch shrugged, though it vexed her slightly to not have Boulderfall take her side. "If he doesn't bother me, I'll leave him alone," she promised.

Boulderfall purred in thanks and together they strolled around the clearing, stopping to talk with the other warriors about the fight. Scorch turned her head as she saw a flash of gold and silver. Sunstorm and Skypool were climbing the rocks to Highledge and they stood together, calling the Clans to gather beneath them.

"What is this about?" Scorch whispered in Boulderfall's ear as they sat down in the crowd.

He shrugged, "I don't know, maybe they decided something about Pinefur?"

"ThunderClan," Skypool mewed, "At this time, we have decided to formerly welcome a cat into the Clan. One who, more than any other, deserves such a status for saving the lives of several Clan cats today."

Scorch and Boulderfall exchanged a glance. What was she saying?

"Scorch," Skypool looked down on her, "Would you join ThunderClan?"

Scorch stared up at the medicine-cat, wide-eyed. Confusion and turmoil wrestled inside her. She wanted to help the Clans, not join them. She wanted to be with her friends, not leave them. She wanted to see her parents, not abandon them. She wanted to love, not be alone.

But right now, this was the place she had chosen to live. This was the home she had chosen to protect, and the friends and family she had chosen to love. She made her decision and raised her head, "I would." Boulderfall purred loudly beside her and cheers went up around the clearing. It seemed every cat was ready to welcome her.

Skypool nodded, looking down on her gently, "Scorch, from this moment on you will be known as-"

"Wait," Scorch stood up. Skypool looked at her, startled, and a hush fell over the cats. "I like my name the way it is. It's the name my parents gave me, and it is the last thing I have left of them."

Cats murmured, but no cat seemed to object and Skypool nodded again. "For now, at least, you can keep your name. But you will be given apprenticeship status since you are so young. Your mentor will be Boulderfall."

Scorch nearly jumped with delight as she turned to her friend. The young warrior purred and touched her nose, "I'll make you the best warrior in the Clan," he promised.

"Not if I do the same for you," she answered with a purr. The Clan was full of cheers of congratulations as Boulderfall and Scorch stared at each other, happiness and warmth filling the air around them that had been so cold and bleak. It was good to be friends again.

Chapter 55: Broken Paths

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The sun shone down through the trees, the tiny green leaves dappling the ground beneath them in clustered shadows. The air was warm, a little too warm, and the breeze was the hot breath of the land. The drowsy heat of the day was faced by two cats, training vigorously in a moss covered clearing.

"No, you're doing it wrong," Boulderfall mewed, stalking around her with his tail lashing.

"I'm always doing it wrong," Scorch grumbled back. Frustration scorched her insides and the sun burned her fur. She'd been trying to get this move right for forever now!

"I'm going to say it again. Leap, and then twist," Boulderfall snapped, stepping back. "Now try it again and land on my back."

Scorch crouched, chest pressed against the warm moss that tickled her as she drew her legs together for the jump. She sprang up into the air, twisting and turning so she could land on Boulderfall's sturdy back.

"Ooof!" the air was knocked out of her as her mentor leaped and knocked her out of the air, landing on the ground with her spine against the earth and Boulderfall's paws holding her legs down.

"You didn't do it right *again*," Boulderfall growled, leaning close to her muzzle with his lips curled back in the beginnings of a snarl.

"I leaped, and then I turned," she spat back, frustrated and angry that she didn't understand what he wanted her to do. "What more do you want?"

"Your turn started as you leaped. Leap straight, as if you were just going to jump forward, and then spin at the last moment. Starting

your turn at the beginning shows your back to your opponent and it is easy for them to attack you, as I just did. You need to leap, and then twist," Boulderfall spat the words out one by one, leaning closer until their muzzles touched.

Scorch glared at him, the frustration added to her embarrassment and the embarrassment added to the heat and the heat added to her anger. "How am I supposed to twist in midair?" she growled, sitting up as Boulderfall released her.

The gray warrior snatched her tail between his two claws and waved it in front of her nose. "Does this look familiar? You have a tail for a reason, so use it."

Scorch frowned as she backed up, couldn't he have said that to begin with? She crouched again, her heart beat a steady rhythm for her to breathe with. This time, she would get it right and show Boulderfall that she could do it.

She stared at Boulderfall and he stared back, their gazes locked. Scorch leaped high into the air, her body pointed straight forward. As she sailed over Boulderfall's head, she whipped out her tail and spun around landing on the ground behind Boulderfall. The second her paws hit the ground she shot forward, knocking into Boulderfall's exposed back and tussling him to the ground.

"There," she purred, her red and black paws pushing on his shoulders as she lifted her head triumphantly.

"You're supposed to land on my back, not behind me," Boulderfall mewed in a surly tone.

"Whatever," Scorch mewed, flouncing off of him. "As long as I turned in midair and took you down, the effect is the same, right?"

"No, not right," Boulderfall sighed, getting to his paws. "In a real battle, you might not have room to maneuver so much. Your biggest trouble is that you take too much room to do your moves. If you were in WindClan or ShadowClan that might be okay, but not here in the forest. You know there isn't nearly as much space here," the tom pointed out.

Scorch scuffled her paws, realizing he had a point. But she wasn't used to living in such a crowded place yet, the leaves on the trees pressed down above her head and the bushes and thickets crowded in around her. "Okay," she conceded, "I'll do it again."

Boulderfall looked surprised at her agreement and he shook his head. "We've been working all afternoon. We can do some hunting on the way back to camp and call it a day. We can try this again tomorrow," he decided.

Scorch nodded, perking up at the thought of hunting. They'd been practicing battle moves since sun-high and now the sun was sinking into dusk. She was hungry and tired and looked forward to seeing the hot day cool down in the evening.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to hunting in this forest," she mewed as they crept through the roots and bushes.

"Well, you joined ThunderClan. So you're probably going to live here your whole life," Boulderfall mewed.

Scorch nodded with a sigh.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about that," Boulderfall mewed. He looked at her curiously, but she sensed he was uncomfortable. "Didn't you say you wanted to go find your parents after you drove out Nightwing and Pinefur? I had always thought that you'd leave after they were gone."

Scorch shrugged, "I don't know why joining ThunderClan would change that."

Boulderfall stopped and stood in front of her. "Scorch, you do understand what joining a Clan means, right?"

Scorch peered past him, exasperated- she could smell the fresh trail of a mouse just beyond him. "It means I'm part of the Clan? I follow the warrior-code and I've agreed to protect and defend ThunderClan even at the expense of my own life?"

"Exactly, you can't up and leave the Clan whenever you feel like it now," Boulderfall mewed.

"And I won't," Scorch mewed, pushing past him and dropping into the hunter's crouch. She stalked forward and spotted a tiny brown nose snuffling among the tall green grass. Holding her breath, she scanned her surroundings, made sure the wind was blowing in her direction, saw that the path to the mouse was clear of debris, and darted forward along the ground like a snake striking from its hole.

"Scorch, I don't understand what you're thinking!" Boulderfall's mew rang up loud and antagonized behind her.

"What do you not understand?" Scorch mewed, facing him with the limp body of the mouse dangling from her jaws.

"You're saying two contradictory things, I don't understand what it is you really mean," the gray warrior mewed, his blue eyes staring down at her beseechingly.

Scorch shrugged, "It makes perfect sense to me. When Pinefur is defeated and the Clans are stable again, I'll go on a journey and find my parents. After I find them and tell them all that's happened, I'll come back and live with the Clan again. If I miss them, I can always travel to see them again and I'll always come back. I didn't think it was complicated."

"But what is the Clan needs you when you leave?" Boulderfall asked, "How do you know you'll get permission whenever you feel like seeing your parents. Scorch, by joining the Clans, you've given up a lot of the freedom rogues exercised. The reward for that is honor and respect, but it isn't freedom," Scorch thought her mentor was trying to make a point, but she wasn't getting it.

"I can still get permission. There's no way I'll be needed all the time when no one wants my help now. But that's in the future, and I'll deal with it when I get there. For now, I am an apprentice of ThunderClan, and I'm content to work hard to achieve warrior status and help in any way I can to defeat Pinefur. Now, let's hunt," Scorch mewed, dropping her mouse and a bush and turning to search for more fresh prey scents.

Boulderfall reluctantly joined her, but she could feel his uneasiness. This wasn't the first time he had hinted upon her not understanding

the Clans. He had been her mentor for nearly a moon and he had taught and showed her a lot of things. She had also grown in size this past moon. The top of her head reached Boulderfall's shoulder when, before, only the top of her ears had reached so high.

That's not all that had happened this past moon. She had worked nearly everyday with Sonya and Time and had nearly complete control over her powers. It was so much easier to use them- though she didn't know what she would use them for- but, at least now she wasn't pressed to go train every day. And that had freed her up to start investigating the spy, even though so far the trail was a dead end.

Featherpaw wouldn't tell her anything and she could never spot any cat going out at night, though she was sure that was when the spy went out. Besides all that, she was constantly looking for Amelia, knowing that the she-cat was still hanging around and not knowing if the she-cat would stay inactive for so long.

And I still need to get Featherpaw to StarClan. Oh goodness, how am I going to do this all alone? "I wish you would tell me about your secrets," Boulderfall growled. She flinched away from him, had he read her mind?

"When you tell me yours," she answered stubbornly. She wasn't stupid, he had his secrets just like she had hers. His desires, she knew, were different than her own. But she always had and was content with it- that didn't mean she was going to spill all of her secrets either.

"Fine," Boulderfall mewed with a hint of defeat, "Let's just hurry up and hunt."

They caught a respectable catch in the short time and headed back to camp. They encountered the dusk patrol returning on their way in and Scorch nodded friendly at Moonfrost who was on the patrol. They went into camp and Scorch dropped her catch on the fresh-kill pile along with Boulderfall.

"Come on, let's eat together," she mewed to Moonfrost and Boulderfall. The two littermates looked at each other with a mix of

awkwardness and wariness. "We won't bite each other, promise?" Scorch half-joked and the two cats nodded slowly, taking a piece of prey.

Scorch grabbed a finch for herself and they sat down together at the base of the rocks that led up to high-ledge. The two siblings kept shooting each other tense glances and the atmosphere was less than cheerful. Scorch picked at her finch, looking at her two friends between bites. She sensed that they weren't angry at each other, just uncomfortable with the others presence.

Scorch jerked her head up as she saw a flash of glittering silver. Featherpaw padded up to them, her amber gaze moving from face to face. The spirit sat down between the two littermates and leaned over to sniff at their half-eaten meals.

Scorch sat in silence, not daring to speak to Feaherpaw in the presence of others. The silver apprentice waved her tail beneath Boulderfall's nose. Scorch's whiskers twitched in amusement as he sniffed, looking disconcerted for a moment.

Then Feattherpaw tickled Moonfrost's nose with her tail and, even though it passed right through, Moonfrost sneezed. Scorch struggled not to laugh and changed it into a cough, shooting Featherpaw a look; half amused, half reproachful.

Featherpaw sighed and padded over to her, sitting down so that her icy fur brushed along her side. "We need to talk tonight, something happened," the ghost cat mewed, looking at her.

Scorch glanced at her and gave a tiny nod. Finishing her meal, she stood up and gave a long stretch, yawning. "You two can finish up, I'm gonna go," she mumbled in a sleepy tone. She turned and padded toward the entrance, hoping they were too busy studying each other to notice she wasn't going to the apprentices den.

Featherpaw trotted in front of her, her silver tail stuck straight in the air. A few cats gave her a curious look as she went out, but no cat was suspicious or hostile. In the past moon since the incident, her assistance had been valued and cats had taken notice of how much prey she caught and how much she helped the medicine-cats.

She still heard murmurs about how she disappeared when she went to train with Time and Sonya, but now that she wasn't doing it so much, the murmurs had nearly disappeared. Even Flameclaw had silenced his verbal attacks on her.

"What is this about?" Scorch asked when they were far enough away from every cat. The sun was setting, the trees making shadows as they were pinned up against the red sky and the undergrowth turned into shades of black as the land was transformed into silhouettes.

Featherpaw looked at her, amber eyes slicing through the dimness. "I think I discovered why I am not allowed to go to StarClan," she announced. Scorch pricked her ears and waited for her to continue. "I went to the moor the other day, and I could just feel it. I won't be able to reach the stars until Pinefur is defeated. Since he killed me, I won't be able to rest in peace until he is gone."

Scorch frowned, "Why would that be? Lots of cats have died since Pinefur came to power, and they all went to the stars. There's not much you can do here other than be lonely."

Featherpaw's shoulders slumped, "I don't feel angry that I died, just sad. And I know I can't do anything, but, I'm sure that is why," her amber eyes burned more fiercely than Scorch had ever seemed. Like smoking embers.

Scorch gasped and gave a little jump, "Do you remember what you were hearing in your dreams?" she asked excitedly.

Featherpaw frowned, "Something about a fire and spirit?"

"Yes! What if you're the spirit?" Scorch mewed, bouncing from one paw to the next as her tail whipped wildly behind her.

"Isn't that too simple?" Featherpaw asked, "I always heard that StarClan prophecies were preposterously vague."

"Well I think cats just over think too much. You are a spirit and you're stuck here with ThunderClan and WindClan, but they don't know it," Scorch mewed firmly.

Featherpaw twitched her ears, "But what can I do? I'm a spirit. And what about the 'fire?'"

Scorch sat down, "I'm not sure. I've been watching the cats, but no one seems especially fired up to face Pinefur. Well, except Moonfrost, but I'd say that she is the exact opposite of fire."

Featherpaw sighed, "Nothing really makes sense."

"Well of course *nothing* makes sense, now we just have to make *something*, and then it'll make sense," Scorch declared.

Featherpaw looked confused. "What I'm saying," Scorch mewed, "Is that I'm tired of this guessing nonsense. It is time to get some answers." She stood up, looking determinedly north, where the first bright stars were appearing. "I'm going to the Moonpool."

"You're going *where*?" Scorch jumped as Boulderfall pushed his way through the ferns.

Scorch's heart beat fast, wondering how much he had heard. She sensed that he was frustrated and confused- he didn't seem interested in the idea of her going off somewhere alone. "You can come with me?" she offered.

Boulderfall glared at her, "I told you before. The Moonpool is a sacred place for medicine-cats and leaders only."

Scorch waved her tail, "I'm sure that the stars will forgive me for intruding. This is serious" she mewed, glancing to the side as Featherpaw rolled on the ground in front off Boulderfall. When the gray tom took a step closer to her in protest, he seemed to trip over the spirit apprentice.

Scorch's expressions remained stolid as he whirled around and searched in vain for what he had tripped over since the ground was clear and grassy there. He turned back to her, looking even more confused now. "What is so important? You should be focused on your training for now, that's the only thing you need to worry about."

Scorch's ears twitched, "I didn't come to your Clan for training, I

came here to help defeat Pinefur. And first we need to solve this fire and spirit business."

Boulderfall's eyes gleamed, "Do you know something?"

Scorch shrunk under his hungry gaze, "Maybe," she mewed meekly, second guessing her thoughts. "But that's why I need to go to the Moonpool."

Boulderfall frowned and shifted his paws, "When are you going?"

"Right now," Scorch mewed, glancing at the sky. If they hurried, they could make it by moonhigh tonight.

Boulderfall blinked and she had already swept past him, Featherpaw leaping to her side as they raced together toward the WindClan border. When they had reached it, the sun had sunk beneath the horizon behind them and the heat of the day was disappearing into a cool breath. Scorch turned north along the stream and soon crossed out of Clan territory. Featherpaw stayed where she was on the Clan side of the border. "I'll wait for you here, I can't go any further," the apprentice promised.

Scorch nodded, glancing back along the barren slope to see the blurred shape of Boulderfall as he chased after her. She didn't wait for him, worried about time as she leaped upward along the rocky path. As she traveled upward, the air took a stony chill she had never tasted before and the wind whistled, not like it did in the trees with a murmuring sound, but shrilly like an echoing scream.

This was not the first time she had come this way and she half remembered the path through the winding rocky hillside, remaining always by the starlit stream. A hedge blocked her way and she ducked beneath it, panting, and looked down the sandy pathway to the Moonpool. The water splashed into the pool with a musical tone and her paws slipped along the path that was bleached white from the nearly full moon.

The moon was reflected in the pool, taking up the entire pool and blinding her with its purity. She crouched down beside it, hearing Boulderfall scrambling up the last few rocks as she touched her nose

to the pool and all fell quiet.

A faint glow beyond her eyelids prompted Scorch to open her eyes. The rock and pool had disappeared and she stood in an open green meadow, the grass waving all around her legs in the breeze. The moon shone down, turning the green tips silver, the stars gleamed like shards of ice in the deep black sky.

"Why have you come here, kit of the moon?" Scorch spun around at the deep voice behind her. A brown tabby tom stood in the meadow with her, his fur rippling in the wind and his hazy blue eyes looked at her in an unfocused manner.

"I came here to demand why Featherpaw hasn't been allowed to join you here," Scorch mewed firmly, raising her chin in defiance at his dignified manner.

The tabby tom let out a long slow sigh, "You have no right to know our business. Featherpaw has not been forgotten, but she has a job to do that only she can complete."

"Is she part of the prophecy?" Scorch asked, pricking her ears.

"That wasn't really a prophecy, more like words of guidance," the tom corrected, mewing slowly. "And no, she is not part of it. The Clans must find out what those words mean for themselves and utilize them."

Scorch lashed her tail, he wasn't making any sense! "Then what is there that only Featherpaw can do? All I see is that she's suffering."

The tom waved his tail soothingly, "We are aware that Featherpaw is feeling pain right now. But she cannot join us, not with a task left to finish or with the way she is now."

Scorch growled, but realized it was useless to ask again if he was only going to confuse her. "What about the ThunderClan and WindClan? Why won't you appoint a leader. They need some cat to guide them to victory."

"They aren't ready for a leader quite yet," the tom mewed firmly. The stars that glittered at his paws glowed brighter like white fire.

"They need to learn to work together and drive out Pinefur. Then, and only then, shall we show them the way. At the moment they are not Clans so they cannot have a leader. Tell them to look to the warrior-code and that will be more than enough guide."

Scorch whipped her tail, remaining silent. "This 'fire of spirit,' did it help ShadowClan and RiverClan? I think Flickertail mentioned it to me once before."

The tom dipped his head low, "Those two Clans were able to use it without our aid. Now the last two Clans must learn to recognize what is more important." The tom turned and walked away.

"Wait!" Scorch cried. She didn't understand and chased after him, but he disappeared in the silver and the shadows.

"You shouldn't bother StarClan if you can help it," a familiar voice spoke out of the darkness and Scorch whirled around, searching anxiously for the figure. But she was still all alone in the meadow.

"Where are you, Song?" Scorch called.

"I'm always with you, Scorch. But you must leave, this is not your territory," Song's voice came from all around her.

"Why not? I joined ThunderClan, so I am technically a Clan cat now," Scorch protested, continuing to scan the darkness for the black she-cat.

"You only joined it in words. Your heart is elsewhere."

"No, it isn't!" Scorch protested, "It is there, back in the Clan," she insisted.

"Oh, Scorch," Song's voice turned soft with pity. "You are deceiving yourself. Your heart is not with the Clan, it is with your friends and your family, wherever they are. But I'm afraid that you are soon going to learn a very difficult lesson. Now go, back to your friends."

Song's voice faded and Scorch felt dizzy, everything becoming hazy in front of her eyes until she pitched forward to the ground. But she didn't hit the grass, instead her muzzle hit the cool Moonpool and

ripples disrupted the peaceful surface.

"Scorch?" Boulderfall's voice tickled her ear sleepily. She raised her head and saw him snuggled against her side, waking up slowly to blink sleep from his eyes. Scorch jumped up, what had transpired quickly filling her with energy and worry.

"We need to head back," Scorch mewed. The moon was still high in the sky, but dawn couldn't be far off.

Boulderfall didn't question her, just guided her stumbling paws down the slope with disciplined patience as she kept slipping and falling in her hurry. "Why are you rushing?" he asked her.

Scorch hesitated, she hadn't learned anything particularly useful, but she felt an intense need to return to the forest. "We just need to hurry," she mewed. Once they got away from the rocks, they were able to race down the open hillside, the light of the moon lighting up the path in front of them.

Scorch didn't slow until the distant trees loomed up in front of them and the ground leveled out. She paused to taste the moist night air, her ears pricking as she caught a familiar scent. She glanced at Boulderfall and saw that he had caught the scent as well, "It's Flameclaw," he mewed, blue eyes narrowing.

"What is he doing out so late?" Scorch mewed suspiciously, starting forward as quietly as she could.

"What are *we* doing out so late. He might have just as good a reason as us," Boulderfall defended his friend. Scorch shrugged, she was more interested in getting home than finding Flameclaw or bickering with Boulderfall. "And you still haven't told me what the StarClan cats said," he added in an annoyed mumble.

Scorch waved her tail, "Later, let's just go home now."

Boulderfall led her between the trees and the light of the moon waned under the canopy of leaves. Scorch noticed that Featherpaw wasn't there anymore and she wondered where the spirit apprentice had gone. *Not that I have any good news to share with her, I still do not*

know how to return her to StarClan.

"Do you smell that?" Boulderfall's growl interrupted her thoughts.

Scorch sniffed the air again, the fur lifting along her spine as she recognized Pinefur's scent in the air. Was he attacking again? No, she sniffed the air again and could only find his scent coming from the direction of the border. Was he scouting out for another ambush? No, now she found another scent. "Be quiet," she whispered to Boulderfall who was looking ready to charge out and face the invader.

She led him off the track through a patch of blooming violets that filled the air with their perfume. "There's another cat with Pinefur," she whispered in Boulderfall's ear. She padded up to a widespread oak tree and scampered up the trunk. She paused on the first branch and signaled with her tail for Boulderfall to follow before jumping up a few branches higher.

Her heartbeat fluttered, but she kept her breathing under control as she felt herself climbing higher. At least she couldn't see how far away the ground was in the dark. But from here she could see the WindClan border and she crouched, her pelt rippling in surprise.

Pinefur stood on the WindClan side of the border stream, his green eyes glowing in the shafts of moonlight that fell between the trees. On the other side stood another cat sat with orange fur glittering silver. Boulderfall made the branch bounce as he leaped up beside her. "What?" he growled.

She stuffed her tail in his mouth, "Keep quiet and look," she hissed.

He looked and she could feel him stiffen as he spat her tail out of his mouth. "What is Flameclaw doing?" he hissed.

Scorch turned to look at him, her face shadowed, "They certainly don't look like they are fighting." In fact, Flameclaw seemed perfectly respectful and even though his words were inaudible, Scorch doubted he was passing along gossip. "He does have green eyes," she observed, that was what Raven had said the spy's eye color was.

"Are you saying he's the spy?" Boulderfall snarled. Waves of anger rolled off of him, but they weren't directed at her, they were directed at the two toms by the stream.

"We have to tell the Clan. With a spy in our midst, we can't really make battle plans to drive out Pinefur," Scorch mewed steadily.

Boulderfall shook and his teeth ground together, "But then Flameclaw will be driven out, if he's lucky," the gray tom growled.

Scorch whipped her tail, "He chose to do this. There's nothing forcing him to do it now that Pinefur isn't in ThunderClan." She couldn't really feel surprised that it was Flameclaw, he had always seemed too against her for no reason. But she was a little disappointed, she had thought that he really did admire Boulderfall; apparently that wasn't enough to make him loyal. "Let's go," she mewed, "If we both say Flameclaw is the spy, they will take it seriously."

"Wait," Boulderfall growled, stopping her as she tried to get past. "Let me talk to him first," he asked.

Scorch twitched her ears, "I don't think that's a good idea. He might attack you if he finds out you know. We should go to the Clan first."

Boulderfall shook his head, "No, I need to speak to him first. I have to find out from him."

Scorch hesitated, it really wasn't a good idea. But he was her mentor and friend, couldn't she trust him to do what needed to be done? *But would he, even if it meant destroying a friendship? Then again, he was pretty quick to leave me when it was against the wishes of the Clan. I think he'll do what is good for the Clan.* Scorch sighed, "Fine, but I'll tell the Clan without you before sun-high."

Boulderfall nodded and jumped down from the tree without another word. Scorch followed more slowly, carefully placing her paws from one branch to another as she slid down. Once on the ground, she could see the light starting to turn gray. Dawn was almost upon them.

Scorch found she wasn't interested in going back to camp alone. Her mind held a weary disturbance of the hollow and the storm that was mounting on this new discovery. Instead she found herself wandering over by the ShadowClan border, longingly looking across the border at the tall dark pine trees that lulled its inhabitants with silence.

"Hey, Scorch!" she jumped at the sharp cry. Looking around, she spotted Thistlebranch running toward her.

"Hello, Thistlebranch," she greeted the deputy, dipping her head respectfully.

"Have you seen Raven?" the tortoiseshell didn't bother with formalities, her blue eyes tired and anxious.

"Raven?" Scorch startled, her mind flashing to the tall, aloof, black she-cat. "No, why? Is something wrong?"

Thistlebranch sighed, "Well, we can't find her anywhere. She didn't come back to camp all day yesterday and we can't follow her scent."

Scorch's heart pounded, "Do you think something happened to her?"

The deputy shook her head slowly. "Raven isn't just some cat that would die without a trace, and RiverClan hasn't seen her either. So I'm starting to think that she left."

"She wouldn't do that!" Scorch protested, "Not with her sister here!"

"I don't know," Thistlebranch seemed doubtful. "They aren't particularly close and if I recall correctly, Raven was once with Nightwing, meaning she left her family before."

Scorch remembered the last time she had seen Raven- so worried and anxious. Was Clan life just not for her? Did she just not want to live here anymore? Or had something happened? "Did RiverClan go back to their camp?" She asked.

Thistlebranch nodded, "About half a moon ago. Since Mira's kits are the only cats that aren't warriors in the Clan, Sunstar felt pretty confident that if Pinefur did attack they could get away to

ShadowClan territory. But we keep in close contact just to make sure we're both doing alright."

"And Raven stayed in ShadowClan?" Scorch continued.

Thistlebranch nodded, "But she did visit RiverClan fairly often, to the annoyance of more than one cat."

Scorch twitched her tail. It really did sound like Raven had been restless and decided to leave. "I'll let you know if I see her," Scorch promised sadly. She didn't get the feeling that she would be seeing her again anytime soon. She stopped to stare up at the paling sky, the last few stars disappearing, *I hope you come back here someday, Raven.*

Melancholy about Raven's disappearance and worried about Boulderfall's decision, Scorch found herself trudging up the long slope to the hill where she had spent so much time with another of her close friends.

The first glare of the rising sun swept over her as she reached the top of the bluff and she blinked, wondering if her friends were here. She was a little surprised to see that no smiling Sonya greeted her and was a little worried that Time was absent as well, also, Sonya's scent was stale. *They wouldn't leave somewhere without telling me, right?*

"Scorch," she blinked and let out a breath of relief when she saw Time stepping out from nothingness. But her relief turned to worry as she saw his drab countenance seemed more somber than usual.

"Where's Sonya?" Scorch asked immediately.

Time shook his head, "She won't be joining us for lessons anymore."

"Why not? Did she leave? Is she sick again? The juniper berries cured her cough, didn't they?" Scorch burst out, pacing in a tight circle to soothe her surges of energy.

"The cough was a side-effect of the sickness, not the cause," Time mewed, "Scorch," she paused to face him, already feeling what was coming and grief clung heavy to her throat. "Sonya is dead."

Chapter 56: Dark Days

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Scorch sat, her tail wrapped over her paws and her eyes staring down at the motionless body patched with white and ginger fur. "How did she die?" Scorch asked, her voice hoarse and her eyes fixated on the closed eyelids, half waiting for them to blink open. This couldn't be happening, not really, right?

"She had an odd illness. It was genetic and triggered for one reason or another. It had been killing her for a couple moons," Time mewed, his voice wasn't sad, but it was quiet out of respect for her feelings.

"Did she know?" Scorch could recall Sonya's cheerfulness, her promise to always be by her side, to follow her everywhere.

"Yes, she was well aware of it." That was what hurt the most, not that Sonya was gone, but that she had promised not to leave, knowing that she could not keep her promise. *Did she think she was protecting me, by lying?*

Regret- bitter and cold- washed up in her mouth. Had she known Sonya was going to die, she would have done things differently. She would have spent more time getting to know her friend, rather than always burdening Sonya with her problems. *She was always so happy to help me, but I never really thought about helping her.*

"So, what now?" Scorch asked. Was there something wrong with her? Grief clamped her throat so tightly she could barely breathe. Yet her vision remained clear; there were no tears for her friend.

"You should bury her. I would help, but I can't touch real things," Time mewed.

"You don't seem very sad," Scorch mewed, almost accusingly.

Time sighed, "It is always sad when a cat dies- especially a young cat- but I've lived for generations, I've seen cats come and go like water passing along in a stream. There will be more, and she will be forgotten."

"I won't forget!" Scorch mewed fiercely. "And neither will the earth. Her memory will always be here for future kits of the moon."

Time shook his head, "What has been lost can never again be regained. You talk as if she will live on in the earth or in your memories. But those will only be memories, she won't ever live again."

Scorch trembled, was he trying to make her feel worse? She knew that life couldn't be taken back when it was lost. But was Time right? Even her memories would fade, becoming hazy as they had with her parents. Was she struggling in vain to hold onto the lives of all her departed friends?

No, I hold them close because they are a part of me. In the face of death, though, did that mean she lost a bit of herself every time they died? And now so many of her friends were dead or gone, was she even herself anymore? "Come on, staring isn't going to change anything," Time mewed.

Scorch nodded, standing up, she'd been told that a few times too many to resist it. Sonya had died in her den, which was a honeysuckle bush growing next to a thorn thicket. When Time had led her to her friend, Sonya had been curled up in a moss nest- as peaceful and calm as if she were just sleeping.

"Did it hurt her?" Scorch asked, starting to dig in the earth.

"I never asked. I know she felt it, but I couldn't tell you how much," Time mewed.

Scorch worked for a time in silence. As she dug deeper and deeper the sky turned from pale blue to rosy pink to yellow as the sun rose over the horizon. The sky was free of clouds and a soft breeze carried along the morning scents of dew grass and blooming flowers. "Why didn't you tell me?!" Scorch burst out, whirling on

Time. "Why didn't you tell me Sonya was dying? I know about herbs, I could have found something to help her!"

"Scorch," Time mewed reprovingly, "It was Sonya's decision to make."

"Well, it was a terrible decision. She should have let me help her!" Scorch mewed bitterly.

"Scorch, Sonya didn't want to bother you with it since she knew when she would die, no matter what."

"What do you mean? Even if it was genetic, I could have stopped it, for a while at least," Scorch argued.

"No, you couldn't have. Sonya told you that she could see the future, right? But only as far into the future as her bloodline went. Her bloodline ended when she died. She always knew this would happen, before she even met you," Time mewed sternly.

Scorch looked at the grave she had dug. Her claws were broken and caked with dirt, smears of brown all over her fur. She remembered that it was not that long ago that Sonya had sat with her and groomed all the knots out of her fur, telling her what pretty fur she had.

"So she knew when she would die?" Scorch's heart ached with agony for her friend. To not just know you were sick, but know when it would take your life. Most cats wouldn't have been able to carry such a burden alone. *Sonya*, she looked back at the lifeless body, *what were you thinking? Why couldn't you tell me? I guess I'll never know now.*

She gently pulled the body out of the den and into the grave, thinking how peaceful Sonya seemed. Had she been happy to die? Had she been sad to die all alone? Didn't she have regrets at dying so young? Wasn't there something she left undone. *'My only wish is to follow you.'*

Scorch choked back a single sob, sniffing a little as she filled in the grave again. And then it was done. Nothing had changed and yet

everything was different. A cat had died and been buried. The world didn't pause for a moment of respect. The cawing of morning birds filled the air and the sky continued to turn blue as the sun rose, the moon disappeared from the sky.

"You'll have to come in for more training now that you have Sonya's powers," Time mewed as she stood, staring down at the mound of tilled earth.

"Sonya's powers?" she echoed. Of course, now that Sonya was dead, she could see into the future. "Is that why you two were so intent on getting me in control, so that I could handle Sonya's powers?" Scorch asked, not shifting her gaze.

"No, Sonya's powers don't really add much to your own. Your amount of power hasn't changed, but your abilities have. This is why you haven't noticed that you've got new powers. Your control hasn't changed so now it will be easier to learn to master these new abilities. But it will still take some time. However, if you had achieved these abilities when you had no control, you would probably have gone insane much faster" the black tom mused.

Scorch sighed. It had been an unending night and this morning hadn't done anything to brighten her mood. Contrary, she felt completely drained and now even her vision was turning hazy. "Steady, Scorch," Time growled as she got to her paws and wobbled.

"I'm okay," she tried to mew, but it turned into a wheeze.

"Maybe you should rest before you go back," Time mewed, a glint of concern in his red eyes.

"I'm fine," she grumbled, turning away from the grave and heading into the forest. She stumbled and tripped her way back to the ThunderClan border and was glad that she didn't meet a fox or badger, she probably wouldn't have noticed it until it was right on top of her.

Just get to camp, just get to camp. She paused, *I know that scent*. Scorch turned, her dark gaze wandering over her surroundings. She was close to the moss training clearing where cats may be, but

nothing moved among the green and the gold.

Taking a few steps forward she paused again, sensing a presence behind her. Turning, she blinked in surprise to see Amelia standing there, a cruel smirk playing upon her muzzle and her eyes shifted ever so slightly downward. "You've had a rough day, haven't you?" Amelia purred.

"What do you want?" Scorch hissed. Grief clouded her thoughts; all she wanted was to curl up and sleep- or die- it didn't matter which as long as she was left alone.

"I just came to tell you that Boulderfall is waiting for you, he's still by the WindClan border with Flameclaw. So pull yourself together and go help him out," Amelia turned away, her black tail whisking over the grassy ground.

"Are you helping me?" Scorch mewed, looking after her incredulously.

Amelia sighed and looked over her shoulder back at her, "I'm finding your games pathetically boring. I'm just trying to move things along. If I grow impatient I'll have to step in, and no cat would want that," then the murderess dove through a clump of ferns and disappeared from sight as quickly as she had come.

Scorch stared after her, trying to arrange her thoughts into a somewhat orderly matter. Forcing her paws to action, she changed her destination and pounded along the path toward the WindClan border. "Hey, Scorch!" She didn't pause as she passed by the dawn patrol, they seemed to be heading in the same direction she was. *Good, if there is trouble, they'll be there.*

Scorch ran until her paws hit the ground dully and her chest heaved for air. She paused to gather herself and leaped over a fallen log, but her back paw clipped the wood and she landed unsteadily, pain and exhaustion forcing a blanket of blackness to cover her open eyes until she was able to blink it away, stumbling forward again.

What am I even doing? I couldn't do anything in this condition. And what is Boulderfall still doing out? Is he still with Flameclaw? She

stopped as voices broke through the ringing in her head. Angry caterwauls rose over the tune of birdsong.

Scorch turned, it was coming from closer to the lake. She slipped her way through the undergrowth and came out upon a rise that overlooked the border stream for WindClan. Down the slope, closer to the lake, two cats wrestled, batting at each other with quick blows and then locking together in a grappling match where they flopped and rolled over the ground.

The gray and orange fur told her it was Boulderfall and Flameclaw before their scents registered. She tried to move forward but her paws felt heavy and colder than stone. "Move." Scorch startled, taking a few hasty steps down the slope and turn around. Was it Sonya? Her heart beat fast.

A flash of silver told her it was Featherpaw and her heart fell with disappointment. But now that she had started moving, she found the strength to keep her paws beneath her as she ran down the slope. "Boulderfall!" she called as the two toms sprang apart.

"Scorch?!" He whipped around to face her, a deep scratch above his right eye leaked blood that ran down his face. "You should leave, I can handle this on my own," he growled, turning away from her to his opponent.

"I didn't offer to help you. But you were only going to talk, not fight!" Scorch mewed, taking a step after him as he faced the mutinously silent Flameclaw.

"Stay back," Boulderfall snapped, "I'm taking care of this on my own. I'll beat him until he has to see common sense."

Scorch stayed off to the side as they leaped at each other again. Even though Flameclaw was taller, Boulderfall was more muscular and he easily knocked the ginger to the ground. But Flameclaw's lanky form made it easier to slip away from the hold on him. The fight dragged on and the two toms didn't speak outside of growls and snarls.

Scorch watched them, her mind was quiet and she didn't see the

fight in front of her, she could only see Sonya's happy smile and bright green eyes. She sniffed, her paws trembled against the warm green grass. She stared down at it, all of a sudden seeing the vibrant green and the warm yellow and white and purple and pink wildflowers that grew in the forest all around her.

She flinched as something wet splattered on her cheek and fell in drops at her paws, bright red against green like little death berries in a yew bush. Scorch looked up and saw Flameclaw holding Boulderfall down, his claws deep in the gray tom's shoulders, he faced her and scowled.

She crouched and leaped forward, whipping out her tail and twirling around to land on Flameclaw's skinny back with her front claws digging into his shoulders. "So you decide to jump in now?" Flameclaw snarled, turning his head to snap at her paws.

Scorch scored her claws across his muzzle and pressed her claws in as far as she could, her legs trembling as she pulled her claws across his back. Flameclaw screeched and jumped off of Boulderfall, putting all his efforts to throw her from his back.

She gasped for breath as she flew through the air and hit the ground, her front black paw twisting as she was wrenched from his back and landed on her side. Flameclaw reared above her, the sun behind him giving him a gleaming silhouette as he poised to strike. "You should have left when I told you," he growled.

Scorch numbly felt him crash with all his strength on her side and wondered why he hadn't gone for her head since that could have killed her. But he effectively left her stunned as the breath was knocked from her and her stomach churned with pain. She could only raise her head weakly to watch him face Boulderfall again.

Boulderfall's blue eyes seemed to have changed, they had gone from frustrated to furious. "I'll give you one more chance to leave peacefully," the gray tom snarled.

"Not a chance. I can kill you both, blame it on WindClan, and remain in ThunderClan to help Pinefur regain control," the orange tom spat.

Scorch winced, then why didn't he kill her? She couldn't even decide if she was glad or sad that he had let her live. But Boulderfall clearly didn't have the curiosity to ask, or didn't want to tempt Flameclaw, and leaped for the orange cat again.

This time Boulderfall was faster than Flameclaw and overwhelmed the ginger tom with a round of blazing jabs that left the tom befuddled and bleeding. "Boulderfall! Flameclaw!" a loud and commanding roar rang over them and the two toms stiffened instantly.

Scorch raised her eyes and saw the dawn patrol that she had passed on the way there standing at the top of the rise, shocked and angry at the display in front of them. Icewhisker was the leader of the patrol and behind him fanned the forms of Spiritstorm, Cavepath, and Jet.

Scorch had gained enough strength to push herself to her paws as they thundered down the slope to them. Cavepath glanced at her and she waved her tail to show she was okay, the other cats were already facing the two scratched and ruffled toms. They continued to glare at each other and growls rumbled from their throats, the hostility between them hadn't disappeared with the arrival of other cats.

"What is the meaning of this?" Icewhisker demanded, looking sternly between the two.

Flameclaw snorted and stuck up his muzzle, but Scorch could see the fear in his eyes. She drew a breath to tell them that Flameclaw was the spy, but Boulderfall turned his head aside silently and she let out the breath without uttering a word.

He will tell them, won't he? She stared at him but he avoided her gaze. The two toms were scolded by Icewhisker for their behavior and Cavepath wandered over to her. "They aren't saying anything, were they fighting over you?"

Scorch snorted, amused and annoyed at the suggestion. "Certainly not. But I won't say, not for now at least," she replied, grunting as she stood and stretched. Her ribs felt bruised as if she had been hit

with a big rock, but nothing was broken or bent out of shape.

Icewhisker was still reprimanding the two young warriors about how Clanmates should never fight or hurt each other and said they would both be punished, but he didn't say what that was. Scorch twitched her tail nervously, without a leader there was no cat to really keep the warriors in order. It was an excruciatingly obvious weak point that must be corrected as soon as possible. *So we need to defeat Pinefur as soon as possible.*

The dawn patrol ordered them all back to camp and Scorch ignored Boulderfall and Flameclaw- who walked stiffly back to camp side by side- and padded between Jet and Cavepath. "I can't imagine what made those two fight, they're always together," Cavepath mewed.

"It is unprecedented, but friends fight now and again," Jet commented.

"But do you see how badly they're torn up? They look like they were fighting pretty seriously, it wasn't just a rough-up," Cavepath lowered his voice.

"And Scorch, how did you get mixed up in this?" Jet asked, looking down at her with his serious gaze.

Scorch sighed, "I won't explain it right now. But I'm alright and I hope Boulderfall will come out with it sooner than later," she sneaked a quick glance at him and saw him staring at her.

She turned face-forward quickly and didn't look back again until they reached the camp. When they reached the hollow, Flameclaw and Boulderfall were sent to the medicine-cat den. Scorch felt fine and would rather not be in a cramped place with them, so she went over to the boulders at the base of the rock-pile leading to high-ledge, stretching out over the sun soaked rock and letting the warmth ease her soreness.

Scorch closed her eyes, her breaths turning shaky as the excitement faded and she was left with the cold reality that another one of her friends was gone, gone forever. Her thoughts tumbled, was there something she could have done? Something that would have

prevented her friend's untimely death, could she have seen it if she'd paid closer attention? Could she have been there at Sonya's last moments? It hurt her so that she could barely breathe to think that Sonya had been all alone during her last breaths, cursing the cruel world with her last breaths.

"Scorch, may I speak with you?" her hazy thoughts were blown away like fog in the wind and she slowly blinked open her eyes, staring at the yellow tom in front of her.

"Yes, Sunstorm?" she sighed, rolling onto her belly and trying to grasp her grieving thoughts.

The yellow tom waited patiently until she nodded for him to continue. "I wanted to ask why Boulderfall and Flameclaw were fighting. Neither one will say a word about it and if it is something serious, it needs to be taken care of."

Scorch twitched her tail, Flameclaw was the spy and he needed to leave. But could she betray Boulderfall when he wanted to keep it a secret? *This is beyond his friendship with Flameclaw, he can't put other cats in danger just because he can't grow up. Some cat has to be mature*, she berated herself. This wasn't betrayal, but would he see it that way?

"I'll tell you everything that I know..." Scorch told Sunstorm all that she had seen and heard last night with Boulderfall- carefully leaving out why they were out so late or where she went when Boulderfall talked with Flameclaw.

Sunstorm listened silently, his gaze growing darker as she came to the end. "And that's when the dawn patrol arrived. You know they won't speak a word about it. I think Boulderfall wants to make Flameclaw see he needs to stop without the Clan knowing," Scorch mewed.

"Even so, he should know that with a spy in our midst we are all in danger. He shouldn't risk our safety for that of a traitor," Sunstorm mewed gravely.

Scorch sighed, "I know. He never had a problem with making harsh

decisions to protect the Clan until now, I wonder why?"

"It is no wonder why," Sunstorm broke in, "They were inseparable when they were kits and until Boulderfall left suddenly, they couldn't have been closer. Since Boulderfall's come back, they've shared that same relationship and even now with Flameclaw betraying his kin, of course Boulderfall wants to help him."

Scorch supposed she could admire that kind of loyalty, but she couldn't understand it. Her friends; Boulderfall, Moonfrost, Painted, Mira, Raven, and Jump, they had never had a problem with cutting her out of their life when she did something they considered wrong. She hadn't hated them for it either, they were just being honest when they said they couldn't follow her down every path she chose.

But wasn't Sonya like that? Her heart pounded as she remembered the she-cat, tears came to blur her vision for a moment and an enormous wave of grief washed over her, almost choking her. Sonya had always been ready to follow and help her, vowed to stay by her side forever and go wherever she went. *But now she's dead, she didn't deserve that, she didn't do anything wrong! Why didn't Flameclaw or some cat else die instead?*

She sniffed and turned her face away so that Sunstorm wouldn't notice her intense anguish. "Excuse me, Scorch, I need to go discuss this with the senior warriors."

"You believe me?" Scorch mewed, she had thought he would need more convincing.

"Of course," Sunstorm looked back at her, "I would be lying to not say I've been suspicious of Flameclaw for awhile, this just confirms my hunch."

Scorch rolled onto her side and returned to her doleful daydreaming, the warmth of the sun easing her sadness until she fell into a fitful doze. She was awoken by harsh voices and through her teary eyes she spied Flameclaw being escorted out of the clearing by several warriors and cats yelling insults and threats at the orange tom who held his head and tail high in the air.

He turned and met her gaze for a moment, a flash of burning hatred branded into her gaze but it didn't even stir her to annoyance as it dissipated on her core of sorrow. She turned her head away and pressed it against the sun warmed rock as the spy left the clearing.

She closed her eyes and half-listened to the buzz of gossip that sprang up among the cats. While she had been sleeping Flameclaw had become a revealed traitor and was now gone. Scorch felt sort of relieved that the orange tom wasn't in the camp anymore, but she worried about where he would go. *Surely he would go to Pinefur.*

Scorch rolled over on her other side, dangling her paws over the edge of the rock. She was growing tired of feeling sad. *But wouldn't it be wrong to feel happy when my friend is dead?*

"Scorch," she opened her eyes to see who it was even though she had recognized the voice and scent.

"Boulderfall?" she mewed, nervousness sprouting as she sensed tension coming from him.

"Why did you do it?" he mewed through gritted teeth.

"It had to be done. Flameclaw was a spy and couldn't be allowed to remain here any longer," Scorch mewed steadily, looking down at his bowed head.

"I could have convinced him, no cat needed to know, you didn't need to drive him out," Boulderfall hissed. Scorch didn't respond. She stared at him steadily, she didn't regret what she had done. "Well, don't you have anything to say for yourself?" Boulderfall spat out bitterly, his shoulders trembling. "Are you happy that he's gone? Happy that I've lost my friend?"

"If you think that I find pleasure in your sadness, you don't know me at all," Scorch snapped coldly. "I didn't want to do it, but Flameclaw made his decision and I made mine. I'm here to help the Clans, you know that, and as a member of ThunderClan I couldn't overlook a spy."

Boulderfall flinched at her words, "He looked at me like he hated

me," the gray tom whispered.

Scorch felt a wave of sympathy, now- more than ever- she could understand the pain of losing a friend. "I know it's sad now, but just because Flameclaw is a spy, it doesn't mean that your memories are gone. It doesn't mean he was never your friend or that he always meant to betray you."

"But it means that something happened to him, and I wasn't there to help him out of it," Boulderfall mewed, his head dropping even lower.

"You can't protect a cat from everything. They have to be allowed to make their own decisions and their own mistakes, or else they would never grow," Scorch mewed, her thoughts flying to Sonya. Sonya had made the decision not to tell her, and she hadn't been able to protect her friend, but that wasn't because she had been a bad friend.

"I think I just need to be alone for a while," Boulderfall sighed, turning away and heading for the camp entrance.

Scorch watched him leave and curled back down upon the stone. She passed the day there, sometimes watching the murmuring groups of cats, other times falling in and out of slumber. Dusk fell away, its rusty glow fading from the sky as the softer light of stars appeared.

Scorch didn't get up as cats headed for their dens. They seemed to sense that she needed quiet and avoided talking to her, though Moonfrost sent her a questioning glance as she padded by. Scorch realized, as the cats disappeared one-by-one into their dens that Featherpaw wasn't in the clearing. *Thinking back, I haven't seen her since I left for the Moonpool, though I heard her over by the WindClan border.*

Scorch got up and stretched, wandering away into the woods. The wild scent of night had taken hold of the forest and the wind whistled over the trees and sent the branches trembling and brushing up against one another, filling the air with subtle noise.

Where was Boulderfall? He hadn't come back to camp yet and his scent was stale near the entrance. She followed the old trail and found herself strolling along the old Thunderpath that gleamed like ice in the moonlight. But she grew weary before she reached the abandoned twoleg nest and the shadows seemed so inviting that she went and curled down on a soft fern bush in the shelter of an oak tree, falling instantly into deep sleep.

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The next morning was cool and Scorch tasted the dew on her tongue before she was fully conscious. Blinking open her twin dark gaze she surveyed the green scenery around her. Standing up, she lightly stepped off of the crushed fern bush and shook out her fur.

Scorch stared up at the sky, pink clouds turning gold in the morning light. It was the second morning she'd seen without Sonya. Not knowing what to do, she headed back for camp, wondering if Boulderfall had returned by then.

She was silent all the way home, absentmindedly she heard the birds singing but her thoughts seemed covered in smoke too deep to penetrate. Her eyes remained unfocused and staring downward, unconsciously helping guide her over the tricky forest trails.

The camp was buzzing with excitement as she entered it and the first cat she saw was Featherpaw. The glowing silver apprentice seemed brighter than usual, her amber eyes sparkling like dewdrops in the sun. "You'll never guess what I just did!" the apprentice was breathless with excitement.

"What did you do?" Scorch murmured, some interest sparking deep in her mind, but it was dim when it escaped beyond the smoke.

"I went into Willowleaf's and Skypool's dreams and told them that they needed to defeat Pinefur and that he was planning an attack on the camp next moon," Featherpaw mewed.

Scorch's ears twitched, "He is?"

Featherpaw nodded, "I couldn't tell you until I told them though,

that's how these things work."

"So are they making plans right now?" Scorch asked, peering around the camp.

Featherpaw nodded, "Sunstorm, Cavepath, and Boulderfall are discussing things with the medicine-cats."

Scorch stared at her in surprise, "Why Boulderfall? He is a young warrior."

"But he's the hero that rescued the Clan- with you of course- but every cat respects him," the silver apprentice explained.

Scorch whisked her tail, she'd heard that before but it was still surprising that he was included in battle plans. But, then again, he had plenty of experience with battles, more so than most cats his age at least. He would be fine helping out, she just wished he'd talked to her first.

Scorch sighed, going to sit down beside Moonfrost. Featherpaw followed and sat on her other side as the three awaited answers in silence. "So, I heard the medicine-cats had a special dream?" Scorch mewed to Moonfrost.

The gray she-cat nodded, her icy eyes narrowing, "Apparently a WindClan apprentice that Pinefur killed came to warn us that Pinefur was preparing to attack us, she said-" Moonfrost broke off as an acorn was kicked at her paws.

Scorch sent a glare at Featherpaw but the ghost apprentice hadn't moved and stared at her with surprised eyes. Scorch shivered as she sensed another presence, an uncomfortably familiar one at that. "I'm going to go get some air, all this waiting is no fun," she mewed.

Bounding out of camp, she turned along the barrier and looked up just as a flash of black covered her vision. Hitting the earth and rolling over, she avoided being pinned to the ground and faced the black she-cat angrily. "It's foolish to attack me so close to camp, every cat would hear you," she growled at Amelia.

The black she-cat sat down licked a paw innocently, "I knew you

had more sense than to make a ruckus and I had some faith that you'd been pounced on so many times that you knew how to avoid it. But I didn't come here to praise your mediocre skills," the black she-cat mewed, turning her cruel amber gaze on her.

"Well, what then?" Scorch sighed.

"That spy that was driven out, Flameclaw? He's disappeared," the black spy growled unhappily.

"What?" Scorch's fur fluffed up on her spine, "Did he go to Pinefur?"

"No, fool. If he had I would have known. But I lost track of him along the WindClan border and I couldn't find him or his scent. But besides that, I wanted to tell you something about Pinefur's plans," Amelia mewed.

"You're helping now? I thought you just wanted to observe," Scorch mewed suspiciously.

"I'm moving things along since you're taking forever. Don't get me wrong, I've already given Pinefur some important information as well so that things are even," Amelia mewed.

"What information did you give him?" Scorch asked warily.

Amelia looked at her reproachfully, "It wouldn't be any fun if I told you that. But do you want this info or not?"

Scorch sighed and waved her tail for her to continue. "Pinefur isn't planning an attack on you, he's setting traps for when you attack him. Your spirit cat got it wrong. He's setting a web to ensnare all of you cats when you attack him. Now, your ghost friend got it wrong because he's planning several little attacks to coax you cats to finally take action, but I would advise you to take some different form of attack than a straight-forward assault," Amelia mewed.

Scorch listened to the information seriously. Somehow, she didn't doubt Amelia's word, but she was greatly confused. "How do you know about Featherpaw? And why are you giving out information?"

"Oh, dear little Scorch, do you really think you're the only special

cat?" Amelia looked at her disdainfully. "And I told you before why I'm doing this; entertainment."

Chapter 57: Light Falls

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"What do you mean we can't just attack their camp? Shouldn't we strike at their heart?" Boulderfall mewed. Scorch faced him with a steadfast gaze as they stood in the middle of a sun dappled clearing, cool shade flitting over their pelts in leafy patterns.

"I told you, Pinefur is setting traps for us to fall into when we attack his camp. Much like how we laid traps for Nightwing and Pinefur before. We'd have too much of a disadvantage if we attacked him on his own terms," Scorch mewed calmly.

It was two days since Flameclaw had been driven out and the spy hadn't been seen since. Boulderfall, albeit a little sullen, had mostly returned to normal. But Scorch felt that he was still withdrawn from her. The Clans, since that day, had turned their focus to preparing for battle by gathering food, reinforcing dens, and giving extra time to battle training.

Scorch had been perplexed about what to do about the information Amelia had given her. She wasn't completely convinced that she could trust the incorrigible she-cat's word, but preferred to rather be safe than sorry and had finally pulled Boulderfall away from one of their training sessions to tell him.

"How do you even know this?" the gray tom mewed suspiciously, narrowing his eyes.

"You know I have... 'powers,'" Scorch mewed, she felt bad about lying, but she'd feel worse if Boulderfall knew she talked with a murderess.

"Since when did seeing into the past allow you to see the present?" Boulderfall scowled disbelievingly.

Scorch rolled her eyes, "Fine, but what I said was true. So we need

to adjust the battle plans or we'll all be defeated."

Boulderfall stared at her mutinously for a moment then bowed his head, "What do you suggest?" he sighed.

Scorch purred, she'd thought hard about this. "I think we should have a patrol do a feign attack on his camp, when we get caught in his traps we retreat. Pinefur wants to defeat us so bad that he'll probably pursue and we can lead him to where the rest of the cats are waiting to ambush him."

Boulderfall shook his head, "You sure that will work?"

"Of course I can't be sure, but I think we should try. Or at least come up with something better than that," Scorch mewed, a little hurt that he didn't like her idea.

"It just sounds too predictable and rests on a chance. What if the cats in the feign patrol can't get away? What if Pinefur doesn't pursue? I can't propose this plan to the Clan," Boulderfall mewed.

Scorch twitched her tail in annoyance, "We can have a cat act as surveyor for the feign attack. They can watch and if the cats are in trouble they can get the rest of the cats and then we're no worse off than the original plan," she suggested. "And I have every faith that Pinefur would pursue," Scorch added, that burning hatred in his gaze was seared into her mind forever.

Boulderfall gave a final, hefty sigh, "I'll suggest it to Sunstorm and tell him your concerns. I'm not sure he'll listen, but I guess I can try."

"Thanks!" Scorch purred, bouncing forward to touch muzzles with him. As she did she noticed the look in his eyes changed, a softer and content gleam passing swiftly over the stony blue.

"I'll see you back at camp then, I'm going to go hunting with Moonfrost and a couple others this afternoon," Scorch mewed as she turned away.

"Alright, make sure you don't eat anything until you get back to camp," Boulderfal mewed.

"Of course!" Scorch mewed indignantly, "Maybe you could try and join up later?" she suggested, shuffling her paws as a fit of nervousness made her ears heat up. What's wrong with me?

"Hmm, maybe," Boulderfall mewed doubtfully, then he turned away and padded through the ferns into the forest greenery while Scorch tried to ignore the hollow disappointment in her chest.

Turning back in the direction of the Sky Oak she trotted speedily along the grass-spotted trail between knotted trees and around bushes. The sun was just past sun-high and the air hot and heavy without a breath of relief coming from the breeze which was nearly nonexistent.

She rounded the corner to the clearing just as the last few cats were gathering and headed to the bottom of the giant oak tree. She jumped up to sit on one of its roots that were as thick as her own body. Moonfrost was there, sitting silently on one of the taller roots and staring down at the cats with an unreadable icy gaze.

Besides the sullen she-cat, Deerpaw of WindClan was there along with her Clanmate Jumpblaze and ThunderClan's Gorsepaw. The shy little tom was crouched beneath one of the roots, looking nervously around with wide brown eyes, as soft and round as a squirrel's belly.

"Are we going to start hunting?" Scorch asked, eying the clouds rolling over the sky, overhead they were white and fluffy but in the distance it looked like storm clouds could be gathering.

"Yeah, there's nothing to wait for, lets split up and meet back here. Come on, I'll hunt alone and the rest of you can hunt in pairs," Moonfrost mewed, dropping down from the root she sat upon and heading off into the forest. Then she paused and looked over her shoulder, "The first cat to catch a piece of prey will be free from anymore work today," the gray she-cat added and jumped away.

"Come on, Deerpaw!" Jumpblaze mewed, the white striped ginger tom charged after the disappeared ThunderClan cat. The two WindClan cats left and Scorch remained with the timid apprentice.

"Come on, Gorsepaw," Scorch mewed cheerfully. "They're making so much noise running about that they won't catch anything soon. We can still beat them."

Gorsepaw nodded doubtfully and crept out from underneath the root and joined her as she started sniffing the air and wandering over to the sides of the clearing. "Hey," she whispered, pausing as movement caught her eyes. "Do you see that starling?" she hissed in Gorsepaw's ear.

He followed her gaze and spotted the speckled black bird hopping along the ground. "Those are tricky so I'll circle around and flush it out and then you leap and catch it, okay?" Scorch mewed.

Gorsepaw nodded, though he was trembling, and dropped into the hunters crouch. Scorch nodded and stalked around to the opposite side of the bird, keeping her intent gaze upon it at all times. She crouched, spying Gorsepaw's golden brown fur and noting that he was in position.

Gathering herself up, she let out a ferocious cry and leaped toward her prey, batting the startled bird down when it tried to take off and hitting it toward Gorsepaw- who hesitated- but was quick enough to catch the stunned animal before it could take to the air again, killing it with a sharp bite to the neck.

"Good job!" Scorch purred, trotting over to him, pleased at the happy glow in his eyes. "Now let's head back quick before any other cat," she mewed, letting the younger apprentice carry the prized bird back to the clearing.

Moonfrost was already there, a plump vole at her paws and she greeted them with a brisk nod. "I just got back, you two did well," the warrior congratulated them. "Gorsepaw can have this win, if you want," Moonfrost offered.

Scorch nodded and purred as Gorsepaw thanked the warrior shyly. Jumpblaze and Deerpaw returned not long later, carrying a large hare in between them. "Wow!" Scorch stared, it was nearly as large as she was. "You may have been the last, but you've got the most impressive prey! Half the Clan could eat off of that," Scorch

congratulated them, getting up and circling around them in admiration.

"Moor hares are much bigger than forest rabbits, but they're pretty rare in the forest," Deerpaw mewed as they put down the large piece of prey. "Slow ThunderClan warriors could never catch one," the tan she-cat added with a hint of smugness, her white spots glistening in the sunlight as she sat down and licked her fur proudly.

Scorch didn't rise at the veiled insult and neither did Moonfrost, though Gorsepaw looked like he wanted to say something. "Ignore it," Scorch whispered to him, "She doesn't really mean it and it doesn't really matter anyways."

The cats decided that with the hare they had more than enough prey and headed back to camp. Scorch's fur prickled a little, she was the only one not carrying any prey, since Gorsepaw was so proud of the catch that she didn't want to take it from him and she hadn't help catch anything else.

As they neared the camp Scorch turned away, "I'm going to see if I can find something else," she mewed.

"We have enough prey," Moonfrost mewed, "You don't have to, and from the look of those clouds it is going to rain."

"I won't go far and I won't stay out long, I'll just see if I can find any easy catches near by," Scorch mewed and waved her tail at the patrol.

Wandering around, she passed several prey scent trails but not one led to actual prey. Before long, the clouds blocked the sunlight and the stifling heat radiated as the scent of rain hung heavy upon the sticky air. Peering up between the trees she saw the clouds were getting darker and sighed, it wouldn't kill her to face the Clan empty pawed.

She started home but paused as a familiar scent hit her, *Flameclaw?* Scorch found the scent trail and looked at the forest warily. It wouldn't be smart to follow the trail alone, but with it about to rain

it wouldn't last until she went to camp and got more cats. *I can just follow it until I find where he is, he won't even know I'm there.*

The trail wound through the forest, twisting and turning, crossing a forest brook several times and leading through every difficult place a cat could reach. Luckily Scorch, being much smaller than Flameclaw, was able to follow the scent trail with relative ease.

As the scent trail neared the WindClan border it suddenly vanished. Scorch stopped and circled around, but couldn't find the scent again. She remembered Amelia had been very displeased when Flameclaw had vanished from her sight. And now his scent trail had abruptly disappeared, not in a clearing or in a thicket, but along a trail of grass and ferns.

There has to be some trick here. Scorch shuffled through the bushes, parting them with her two paws to peer through them. She checked along the bases of the trees to see if he had climbed up one, but there was no scent and no scratch marks.

Completely confounded, Scorch sat down and looked around with a sigh. She flicked an ear as a rain drop hit it and tipped her head back to look up at the sky, her fur lifting as she heard a low grumbling. *I really hate thunder.* She still hadn't outgrown that fear, and she shivered to realize she was all alone and far from camp.

I should head back before the storm really gets here, getting to her paws she hastily pushed her way through the ferns and gasped as she tripped and barely caught herself from falling. *A rabbit hole?* She looked to where she had stumbled and blinked in surprise to see a wide dark hole completely shaded by lush green ferns.

It smelled vaguely of rabbit, but more freshly of cat and it was big enough that a small to middle sized cat could easily slip in and out, a large cat may even be able to force their way in if they had to. The hole's distant scent of stone and water told her it was an entrance to the underground tunnels. Her pelt prickled with unease and delight, surely this was where Flameclaw was hiding but the scent of cat had gotten much fresher in a few seconds.

Scorch growled as a flash of orange surged out of the hole and she

jumped backward as the cat lunged for her throat. "Flameclaw," she snarled, anger for the tom bubbling fiercely where it couldn't a few days ago.

But the ex-warrior did not spare time for pleasantries and jumped for her. Scorch sprang to dodge but another rumble of thunder froze her and Flameclaw knocked her to the ground, pinning her back to the ground with his paws on her chest.

"What are you doing here?" Flameclaw snarled.

"I should be asking you that," Scorch mewed, her mew turning to a choke as he moved one of his paws from her chest to her throat and put pressure against it, making it difficult to breathe. She glared up at him, "Why didn't you crawl to Pinefur?" she wheezed.

"Although it is true I work for and admire him, his feelings aren't actually mutual. If he finds out I got driven out he'll probably discard me," the orange tom growled. "And may I remind you that it was all your fault," he added, his green eyes lighting up as he scored his claws across her muzzle.

Pain ripped across her face but she didn't flinch, her muscles trembling with rage. "So now you are a rogue with no where to go?" she sneered, "Why do you stay then?"

"Because," he mewed smoothly, "I can still keep an eye on the Clan from here and when Pinefur reconquers you Clans this will just be a bad memory."

"Like I'd let that happen!" a new voice yowled and the weight was released from Scorch's throat and she heaved in full breaths as she rolled over and found her paws.

A furious gray blur surged around Flameclaw, the orange tom no match for the battle-weary Boulderfall. *Boulderfall was going easy on Flameclaw last time, he really isn't any match for my mentor,* Scorch thought proudly. And this time, there was no hesitation behind Boulderfall's blows, they came fast and heavy against the helpless tom who raised his paws feebly to protect his face.

Scorch watched as Boulderfall knocked Flameclaw to the ground and stood over him. "If you want to keep your miserable life, you'll get out of ThunderClan territory and never return," they gray tom mewed, his stony blue eyes staring down at his old friend with disdain.

Flameclaw seemed to sense the change in Boulderfall as well and slunk away quietly toward the rogue border, leaving a trail of blood for the rain to wash into the earth. Scorch padded up to Boulderfall whose sides heaved with deep breaths. She jumped as a flash of light was followed immediately by a roar of noise.

"Still afraid of thunder?" Boulderfall laughed as she pressed against him, trembling with her eyes laid flat against her head.

"I don't like the sudden noise, the way you can feel it making your insides tremble," Scorch muttered, turning her face into his fur as more rain fell down.

"Well, now that Flameclaw is taken care of, lets go. Are you hurt?" Boulderfall asked, looking at her scratched muzzle worriedly. Scorch shook her head, she could feel the scratches were shallow, they weren't even bleeding. The two turned away and Scorch stuck to Boulderfall's side, jumping and trembling all the way back to camp while Boulderfall laughed at her fear and laid his tail over her shoulders soothingly. Scorch remembered Painted doing the exact same thing for her and she smiled despite her fear.

...

"We're going to attack tomorrow?!" Scorch exclaimed, peeking over her fluffy tail that she had curled in front of her nose. Boulderfall nodded, his blue eyes glowing in the dark den. Scorch shivered as a fading rumble of thunder resounded over the forest.

"They decided to attack before Pinefur could strike. Now that Flameclaw is gone, they aren't as worried about our plans being found out but they want to hurry before Flameclaw can give away too many secrets," the gray warrior mewed.

"Did they listen to my ideas?" Scorch asked.

Boulderfall hesitated and then nodded, "They considered it and agree that a full frontal assault on the camp probably wasn't the best idea since we'd be going in blind. So instead we are going to have two scouts survey for traps and then attack the camp from two opposite directions while keeping an extra patrol in reserve," Boulderfall mewed.

Scorch nodded, that would work, or at least she hoped it would. "Who are the scouts?" she asked, wondering if she could do it. She had rather sharp eyes.

"Two WindClan warriors," Boulderfall growled, as if reading her thoughts. "You may have more experience with battles and such than most cats your age, but you are still an apprentice and a young one at that. You won't be taking any unnecessary risks at all," he ordered.

"Yes, mentor," Scorch sighed, cuffing the tom's ears lightly. "But I can take care of myself, I won't hold back or run away," she mewed firmly. "Besides, I'm part of a Clan now, I have to be able to put my life on the line in a fight."

"There is a different between being courageous and foolish for your Clan. If you can't figure that out you'll get yourself killed needlessly," Boulderfall growled, cuffing her ears back sternly.

"When are we heading out tomorrow?" Scorch asked

"We head out tonight, we'll strike just before dawn," Boulderfall mewed.

"That's not long from now," Scorch mewed doubtfully, the storm was clearing and dusk was nearly upon them.

"The warriors are already being alerted and are getting in last minute training. Then they'll eat and sleep and we will be ready. How about you?" Boulderfall narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'm always ready," Scorch declared frivolously, sitting up and raising her chin.

Boulderfall's purr grew as another rumble of thunder startled her

and she jumped a little. "Don't be too ready, battles are dangerous and this is not simple fight. We will be nearly equally numbered and it will be difficult. Yet, we can not afford to lose or be beaten back or Pinefur will press his advantage in the most cunning way."

Scorch shrugged and laid back down, "I'm not too worried. We have much more to fight for then they do. Most of them are rogues so I understand how a lot of them feel. Honestly, if it weren't for my friends here, I would probably have left a long time ago since honor and glory don't interest me," Scorch mewed, rolling onto her back.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't leave," Boulderfall mewed gently, pushing his paw into her belly so that she squeaked and rolled over again.

"Hey, Boulderfall!" The two cats looked up as Ravenpaw poked her head into the apprentices den. "Sunstorm wants to see you," the apprentice mewed.

Boulderfall grumbled under his breath but got to his paws, "Scorch, go do some training with another warrior. You need to be at the top of your game for tomorrow," then he left with Ravenpaw leading him away.

Scorch yawned, she was confident in her skills to at least keep her alive. Getting to her paws, she lifted a hindleg to scratch behind her ears and froze as Featherpaw's glowing figure flashed past the entrance. For a moment, the silver apprentice had looked white and Scorch's heart instantly ached with longing for her lost friend Sonya.

She didn't miss her friend most of time, it was a grief that came over her when she was least expecting it. On patrol, hunting with her friends, in the middle of the night, or when she first woke up and saw the mist disappearing from the forest.

Oh, Sonya, deep regret and sorrow was embedded in her grief and she had to shake it off like a cat would a sleepy haze. Scorch got to her paws and pushed her way out of the den, heading out past the buzzing Clan into the forest. She padded around to a secluded clearing full of flowers; buttercups and bluebells, primroses and pansies filling her vision with delightful colors in a swath of soft

green grass.

Scorch sat in the middle of the clearing. The grass was wet from the rain and she shivered as her own pelt dampened from brushing against them. The air was fresh and cool from the rain, the scents of the forest stronger after the downpour. The grumbling gray clouds were corralled into the eastern corner of the and the western sky was turning orange as sunset swept over the great blue.

I wonder what tomorrow will look like at dusk, will the bright colors sing our victory? Or will the bloody sky paint our defeat? I can only imagine how happy Boulderfall will be... Scorch stiffened as her breath was stolen and images flashed before her eyes, they were so chaotic and numerous that she couldn't hardly see a single thing. No, she did see one thing, a pair of familiar blue eyes was clear in every image. Was she seeing the future? Boulderfall's future? She didn't understand it, didn't she have control over her powers? *But I was trying to imagine it, right? His future?*

Scorch nervously looked around her, was any cat watching her? She couldn't sense any cat and she focused again on Boulderfall's future. *I just want to see if he gets through the battle alright.* Focusing solely on his future, the images flashed again, but this time slower so that she could make them out. Her heart beat quickened, could this really be what will happen?

"If you change the future, there will be consequences," Time's voice growled around her.

Scorch broke off from the future stream and her heart beat rapidly like that of a trapped bird. She couldn't see Time, and she didn't want to. "You told me that before, but this... I can't let this happen and that's that." Scorch looked up at the sky, but what could she do?

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The steady thrum of paws thumped against the smooth ground. Shadows hid the figures and silence reigned over every breath. Scorch walked amidst the warriors, shoulder to shoulder with Gorsepaw and Frostshine. Up ahead she couldn't see Boulderfall and

Cavepath, but knew they were the ones leading the warriors. They were the two in charge of the first attack while Sunstorm led the reserved warriors in a longer route through the forest to investigate the traps.

The patrol were still in the forest, but they were drawing steadily closer to the WindClan border. The trees started to thin, the shadows drew further apart, and the wind became a little sharper. The two scouts, Redleap and Jumpblaze- the fastest cats in WindClan- had already headed out to scout for traps ahead of them.

The sky was still inky black, the stars glittering brightly but very far away. Scorch could feel the distance between them but also sensed their eerily close nearness. Would any cat be going there in this battle? A tiny shift in scent told her that morning wasn't far off, the moon descending behind the branches of the trees.

The cats in front of Scorch slowed and she stopped, watching the warriors in front of her leaping across the ditch that held the tiny stream that served as the border for their dangerous foe. Scorch crouched, bunching her muscles to leap across the ditch and then pausing to steady Gorsepaw with her tail as the smaller tom stumbled on his landing in the dark.

"We're in WindClan territory now, so we won't go far until the scouts return," Boulderfall's hushed mew sounded loud in the utter silence.

The cats moved forward slowly, the thrumming pawsteps turning more into a whisper as they stalked as silently as possible through the remaining woods. The dark was starting to lighten, the clear black sky turning to a dark smoky gray and the stars seemed a little bit duller.

Scorch paused and looked back at the ThunderClan border, a flash of glowing silver and amber told her Featherpaw had seen them off. *Today, you will return to the stars,* Scorch thought firmly. If the Clans got back to normal, she was sure Featherpaw's mission would be completed and she could have her much needed rest.

Ahead, two lithe shapes moved gracefully toward them at a

stunning speed. Mounting the hills and rounding the gorse and heath bushes with languid ease in the shadowy darkness. They came to a halt before Boulderfall and Cavepath and the two toms nodded as they conveyed information.

Boulderfall turned to them, "There are several traps laid up ahead, but Redleap and Jumpblaze will guide us around them. We will continue with our battle plans. If we do happen to get into a trap, stay calm and quiet. If possible, we will temporarily retreat and decide if it is prudent to continue."

The cats nodded and continued forward, a moving mass of fur and bone that moved as one highly trained entity. Over the windy hills they went in a long winding trail to avoid traps, they never spotted another soul and before long they'd approached the camp. "Alright," Cavepath faced the cats, "WindClan, follow me. ThunderClan, follow Boulderfall. ThunderClan will give the battle cry and then we will fight for our home, our honor, and our lives."

The WindClan cats flowed out of the group, following the dark tom. Scorch padded forward, "Do you think Sunstorm and the black rogues are in position yet?" Scorch asked. The reserved forces were all the black rogues that had been the main liberating force of ThunderClan.

Boulderfall looked at the sky, "They're probably close enough, it is nearly dawn now. We should start this battle before we're spotted. It is too difficult to stay hidden up here for long," he growled. Scorch sensed he was uncomfortable with the vast space, but she relished in the breath of fresh air that flowed through her fur.

"Boulderfall, remember, our main target is Pinefur and then the two deputies. With the heads taken out, the rest will be in chaos," Scorch reminded him.

The gray tom nodded his silhouetted head, "And you need to remember that you are not in charge of taking one of them out. You just busy yourself with the small fry," Boulderfall growled.

Scorch sighed and nodded but stiffened as her thoughts flashed back to her visionary mirages the night before. She nervously

looked at Boulderfall, was it true? Could she trust herself? She had never looked into the future before, it was possible she had made a mistake. But why would she be wrong?

"Well, ThunderClan, let's go," Boulderfall raised his head and moved forward, no longer silent, but purposefully and loudly, letting his presence known.

Scorch and the other cats followed his lead, stomping their paws, cracking twigs under paw, and breaking branches on the heath bushes. Scorch's eyes flashed down beneath them and spotted movement in the ravine beneath. That was WindClan's camp, but such a large fighting force would be at a disadvantage if they tried to fight down in the narrow gorge.

"Remember," Boulderfall growled as a gathering clamor grew beneath them, "Don't let them drive you anywhere or you might end up in a trap."

Scorch's heart beat fast in anticipation and her mouth went dry, her senses dimmed by the pounding rhythm of her heartbeat. The first wave of enemy cats charged up the hill and hit them, sending them all into a screeching fit as was the signal. Scorch grappled in battle against a lanky tom whose pelt color was hard to determine in the dim light. But she was fighting side by side with Leopardspot and they easily parried the attacks of the confused tom who still seemed half asleep.

Out of the corner of her eye she heard another screech and Cavepath's patrol exploded, flooding up the gorge as they drove the stragglers into the fray, using their superior speed to confuse them in the dark that they were severely outnumbered. *There, now every cat is here and the melee can begin.*

Scorch prided herself as she sent an enemy reeling away with a well-aimed hit to the nose. Her eyes were sharper than most, so while even ThunderClan and WindClan struggled to see their opponents movements, Scorch could see them clearly enough and held an advantage over her enemies.

After awhile of confused batting, the light began to brighten and

the shapes and forms of cats were clearly silhouetted against the sky. Scorch paused from facing an opponent to look around. The two deputies, Goat and Spark, were being engaged by two teams of warriors. Cavepath was there too, fighting a cat twice his size but three times slower.

But where was Boulderfall? And Pinefur? Boulderfall was supposed to take Pinefur down with Cavepath's help, right? Her heartbeat pounded loudly again, like it had before the battle, and now a wave of nausea made her stumble; this couldn't be happening.

Escaping from the middle of the battle, she stood on a higher hill and searched desperately for two figures. There! She spotted them tussling back down in the WindClan camp. Hurtling herself forward she flew past the battle and down into the ravine.

Boulderfall was being beaten back, his attacks effectively blocked with expert ease by the keen eyed Pinefur. "Is that the best you can do?" the copper brown tom sneered, green eyes both glaring and lighting up with delight.

Scorch's heart seemed to stop; she had seen this before. She didn't move, knowing what would happen next as if reliving a nightmare. Boulderfall gave a roar and leaped forward, claws outstretched for Pinefur's head. The evil-eyed tom, as deft as a snake, dodged beneath his claws and surged up, striking Boulderfall's stomach and throwing the gray tom off balance so that as he landed Pinefur easily pounced and landed several stinging blows before he pinned the young tom with his belly pressed against the earth and his legs splayed out like a gangly frog

"A green cat like you never stood a chance," Pinefur's gleeful sneer turned into a curl of fierce anger.

Scorch's paws moved, she had to stop this. She couldn't let Boulderfall die, not like in her vision, she wouldn't allow it."*If you change the future, there will be consequences*," Time's words haunted her, but she could handle any consequence as long as Boulderfall was there with her.

And suddenly the world felt different. Still to an almost stifling

sense. The grayness of it all blurred into her and she felt as if she were fading into the background. But everything was silent and still, had Time stopped her? But she could still move though Pinefur's gaze never changed and his claws didn't dig any deeper into Boulderfall's throat, even the beads of blood from the gray tom's scratches had ceased to drip.

I can kill Pinefur here and Boulderfall won't have to die! Without hesitation she leaped for the copper brown tom, she had thought her leap was too short, but it was more than enough and before she knew it, both her claws had scored across the tom's throat and the world jumped back to normal with her facing Pinefur and the tom's gaze turning sickly pale as he gurgled. The wound she dealt was fatal.

Pinefur stumbled back off of Boulderfall, staring at her as if she were something unnatural. *Though, that isn't wrong.* "It was you!" he hissed, spluttering and spitting out dark blood.

Scorch's paws seemed stuck to the ground as she looked at the awful wound, she'd done that in a moment when he had been completely helpless. What kind of warrior was she? Lost in her misery, she heard Boulderfall's screech of warning a moment too late.

Bright red flashed before her confused gaze and pain like a million bee stings poking her eyes. A sharp noise made her ears ring and it took a moment to realize it was her own screech of pain. She blinked her eyes, drawing in more breaths to scream. Only blackness swam before her vision and she couldn't hardly feel the ground under her paws.

Almost desperately, she flung herself downward and felt her cheek resting against the cool ground, her sharp breaths making her whiskers tremble. Scorch stared, pausing in her screams. But she stared at nothing, for nothing was all she could see.

Chapter 58: Chasing Clouds

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Time swirled all around her. No, not time, but noise. It sounded a lot like time. Or maybe time sounded like noise. Scorch was aware of the incessant noise that surrounded her head like a cloud of buzzing flies and filled her insides with inescapable pressure.

Darkness held her close, a thick black wing shielding her eyes from the world around her. Pain lanced through her face, her eyelids squeezed tight as if it would make the pain go away. But even without her eyesight there were other observations coming in from her senses.

She could feel her cheek laying flat again the ground in some sticky liquid that she could smell was salty; blood? And then there was the noise outside her head. The battle was still going on, high over her head she could hear the screeches of battle as she once heard the faraway screeches of seagulls.

But there was closer noise. She could hear a roar above her head and the sounds of blows being landed, the meaty thump telling her that claws weren't being used but pure power against a cat without a will or the ability to defend itself. What was going on? She wanted to call out, but pain kept her mouth shut tight.

Scorch tried to find her paws, but it was like trying to find the bottom of a dark pool of water. Finally she felt all four of her paws touch the ground and slowly she pushed herself up, rocking back onto her haunches and swaying as she lifted her head. There was no way to tell which way was straight up while the noise and pain made her nauseous, making it more difficult to stay upright.

A gurgling cry close to her ear startled her in her haze of pain and she jumped, nearly falling but managing to catch herself jerkily on the ground. By scent she recognized Pinefur, but only barely could she tell through the overwhelming scent of blood.

He has to be dying, I did cut his throat. But he got me too. She could feel his claws feebly pulling on her fur and she backed away, her paws trembling in uncertainty against the cold ground. "Scorch, are you okay?" the thumping blows stopped as the desperate mew sounded in her face. She could hear paws scuffling as if something were being kicked away.

She turned her face toward the voice, blackness still cloaking her vision. "Boulderfall?" her voice mewled like a pitiful kit and she heard his cry of dismay as he looked at her.

"Your eyes... oh," there was pain in his voice and Scorch felt hollow cold, knowing that it was for her.

"I can't see anything, I can't open my eyes," she mewed.

Boulderfall shivered beside her and she stiffened, "Scorch, your eyes are open."

"But I can't see anything!" she exclaimed, her lip quivering as heavy fear filled her.

"Just rest," Boulderfall sounded lost as he guided her through the darkness.

She sat down with her back to something hard and cold, a rock? Scorch couldn't see anything and she kept turning her head, searching for some light but nothing so much as flickered at the edges of her vision. "Is the battle almost over?" she asked Boulderfall who she sensed was perplexed and scared.

"No, but with Pinefur dead it's only a matter of time before-" his voice was broken by a yowl and Scorch flinched as gravel sprayed her face as some cat leaped down in between her and Boulderfall.

"Flameclaw!" Boulderfall's furious hiss reached her before the intruder's scent. Snarls erupted in front of her and Scorch got to her paws, padding clumsily along the wall of rock as the two rolled and thrashed about.

"You fox-heart, you killed Pinefur!" Scorch was helpless as the orange tom sprang on her back, rolling her over so that her belly

was exposed and landing heavy blows on her aching face which she feebly tried to block with her fore paws.

"Where's Boulderfall?" she cried, trying to sniff the air for his scent.

"My friends are keeping him busy," Flameclaw snarled, he wasn't even trying to take pleasure over her defeat- he was raging.

His claws pressed into her soft flesh and she yowled in pain as he dug deeper, he really would kill her. Thrashing wildly, she tried to reach something that could help her. But she couldn't find a foothold and without eyesight she couldn't aim for his paws or block his blows effectively, they came and went in hissing darkness. She tried thrusting upward to headbutt him but he was much stronger and just sent her slamming back down again with a heavy blow.

"We may be going down, but I'm taking you with us!" Flameclaw snarled, his claws curling tighter until she writhed in agony, scrambling at the ground desperately and dragging her claws through the dirt.

Flameclaw pulled at her skin harder for a moment and then let go, his weight disappearing off of her and leaving her scratches oozing sluggishly with blood. Scorch shook her head, the noise had gone quiet. The distant growls of Boulderfall as he fought off what sounded like two opponents was still there, but there was no noise from Flameclaw, not even a breath.

Scorch winced as she pushed herself to her paws, a little surer now that there was less noise. Moving her head around she still couldn't see a thing and without a noise there was nothing to attract her attention. She took a deep breath, tasting the air for scents and felt her muscles instinctively clench up at the new one she caught.

Scrambling backward from the scent she tripped over something on the ground and fell backward, splaying out helplessly on her sides as she clambered back to her paws, whipping her head from side to side, twitching her ears as she tried to catch a sound. "I know you're there, Amelia," Scorch mewed uncertainly. She nearly reared in surprise as a scent wave of blood washed over her.

I didn't get hurt again did I? She could feel the wounds on her belly and on her face still, but no new pain shot up and she was still regaining strength from the initial shock. Nothing had happened to her, so where did all this blood come from?

She flinched away as a hot breath blew on her ear, Amelia's scent now overwhelmed her. "You should thank me for saving your life," the she-cat cooed.

Scorch blinked, cursing her lack of vision. "What do you mean?"

"Why, what else?!" Amelia cried in surprise, "Flameclaw lies dead at your paws and you ask me what I did?" the she-cat scoffed. "You'll never have manners, will you," the she-cat sighed expressively.

"I can't see him," Scorch defended herself, then bit her tongue and started backing away again, her paws sloshing in what she could smell to be blood, her lip curling in revulsion.

"Oh?" Amelia's voice sounded more interested, "Your eyes do look pretty messed up, all watery and glassy- reminds me of the look of a dead fish. Except there's more blood, lots of blood on your face, but it blends in with your red fur. It's a good look for you, really," Amelia mewed and Scorch could hear her voice getting closer even though she didn't hear the sound of accompanied pawsteps.

"Why did you come here?" Scorch mewed, trying to change the subject.

"Well, that's very simple," Amelia mewed, her voice halting its advance. "I didn't like Flameclaw- he was an insult to all spies, quite horrible, wasn't he? Getting found out and all- so when I saw him emerge from the ground like some kind of rabbit I hurried over as quick as I could. And by that time he was here and attacking you, so I put an end to him. He was a terrible fighter too, what a disappointment," Amelia sighed again.

But Scorch was confused, "If you were right there when he came out of the ground, couldn't you have killed him then?"

Amelia laughed lightly, her voice fading as if she were moving

further away. "I've told you before, you're not the only cat that's special," now her voice was a hiss in her ear and Scorch shivered as if she were being stared at from all sides, completely vulnerable.

"What can you do?" Scorch choked out, turning her head toward where Amelia seemed to be standing.

"I can't just tell you that for no reason- do you have any sense of fun in mystery at all? Just know that I'm always, always, watching," and now Amelia's voice really was fading and Scorch could hear her paw steps retreating as well.

Scorch stood still for a moment, what did Amelia mean? What kind of power did she have? Time said there were only two of them- one now that Sonya was dead- but had he lied? Or was this something completely different? Or was Amelia just messing with her and she really was simply an incredible spy?

"Scorch! Scorch!" Boulderfall's shouts shattered her thoughts and she turned her head in his direction, still blinking vainly to try to see him. "Are you alright?" his voice was right in front of her, his panting breath making her whiskers tremble.

She sat back, using a paw to feel the wounds on her belly, they were still oozing blood and stung like fire. The pain on her face was subsiding, but it still felt tight and she still felt agony at any slight movement she made. "I think I can make it back to camp," she murmured.

"Then let's go!" Boulderfall chirped, sounding unexpectedly cheerful. "Pinefur's dead and WindClan and the black rogues are driving out the remaining enemies right now, we've won the Clans back!"

...

So much had happened these past four seasons. Scorch was now a full four seasons old. But she didn't ever get to see the height of greenleaf. For her first one she was just a newborn, and now she was blind.

The medicine-cats tried their best, for days after the final battle

they tried everything they could to heal her eyes. Willowleaf even stayed behind to help after the rest of WindClan had returned to their home. But nothing could be done for the red and black kit and she knew it.

Since Scorch could no longer be an apprentice and the Clan wouldn't dream of kicking her out- since she was, after all, a member of ThunderClan- she was retired before ever achieving warrior-ship. That wasn't what bothered her, she had never cared about the honor of a warrior. What naturally bothered her was her helplessness and uselessness.

In the drafty, unkempt honeysuckle den which was called the elders' den and had been abandoned when Pinefur killed off the elders, Scorch did the only thing she could do on her own, sitting and staring into darkness for days and nights.

While the Clan was celebrating and telling stories of their battle scars to each other, Scorch sat outside the honeysuckle den, letting the sunlight soak her fur with heat as she sat alone like an outsider all over again. Not even Featherpaw visited her, for the ghost apprentice had vanished before they'd returned from the battlefield.

Of course Scorch was happy that Featherpaw had finally found her way into the stars, but she couldn't even look up and try to see her and without a goodbye from her friend she felt shunned. This, along with her unfortunate circumstances, made her feel rather miserable and she became miserable to be around.

Half a moon after the battle Scorch sat outside the honeysuckle den, sniffing at the dewy scent on the breeze and licking her lips since she hadn't had a drink of water in a few days. She smelled Wing walking closer to her. "How are you this morning?" Wing mewed awkwardly. The she-cat seemed happier since the battle, but she was by no mean friendlier, "See anything new lately?" the rogue mewed, the ground crunching as she sat down by Scorch's side.

Scorch didn't respond, a sharp retort forming on her tongue. However, she hadn't completely lost her friendly nature and she curbed her frustration at Wing's horrible joke. "Are you leaving today?" Scorch asked instead, wrinkling her nose as a distant whiff

of skunk reached her.

"So eager to see me gone?" Wing joked again and Scorch growled. "Okay, okay, I get it," the rogue sighed. "Yes, I'm leaving today. Jet, Snake, and Slate are coming with me. I bet you know, but Crow and Rita went with the WindClan cats to the moor and thanks to your endorsement, Shade managed to get into ShadowClan, thought I don't think he was thrilled to live among the pines again. They got changed names too, but I didn't bother to remember them," Wing mewed.

"How polite," Scorch murmured, "And the others are staying here I guess?"

"Yeah, Leopardspot grumbled about that, but without us, you Clan cats wouldn't have defeated Pinefur," the rogue boasted.

"You're not wrong," Scorch grunted, shifting her paws. "So what are you going to do?"

"Leave, see the world maybe, then settle down and have a family. If I find the right cat, of course," Wing mewed, sounding more optimistic then ever before as she imagined her future.

Scorch could feel pangs of jealousy run under her skin. She would never see the world again, and how she longed to see something other than the darkness. "Well, I better get going," Wing mewed, getting to her paws.

"You're leaving right now?" Scorch mewed, surprised.

"Yeah, I want to be out of here before the sun fully rises. The others are waiting by the entrance. I guess this is good bye, Scorch. It has been... interesting to make your acquaintance. And I, uh, I wanted to apologize for the time when Nightwing almost killed you and I let him do it, that was... hard to watch," the she-cat's voice was thick with emotion and Scorch could feel deep regret emanating from her.

"I forgive you, and best of luck," Scorch mewed simply, pausing her thoughts to listen to the pairs of retreating pawsteps. No cat had

come out to watch them leave, they had disappeared on their own and that was probably for the best.

Scorch blinked and turned her aching face to the cool morning breeze. Her wounds were healing so that they were only sore now, but what did it matter if they healed or not if she were helpless? She could barely navigate herself to the fresh-kill pile and back. *And what's the point of my powers if I can only see what happened and what will happen in the camp? I can't see anything useful and I couldn't do anything about it even if I did!*

Bile rose in her throat and she felt like crying for herself. After all, everything was over, right? She would never be able to find her parents now, never hunt with her friends, never explore or adventure anymore. Everything she had wanted had been stolen from her in a heartbeat. Had she done something so terrible? Did she deserve this miserable fate given to her at such a young age. She hadn't even reached her prime and now her life was confined to narrow quarters that she'd never escape from.

I can't even see Boulderfall anymore, he'll probably just forget about me and find new friends. After all, he hasn't even visited me since Skypool told him I was blind. Horrible thoughts ran through her mind, loneliness, countless days and nights filled with silent pain, and a useless life that no cat would ever share or mourn. Was death such a bad option? It wouldn't be difficult to do, she just had to go into the forest by herself, the creatures would do the rest for her. All she had to do was run into a fox or badger, an owl may even be able to fly away with her.

What am I thinking? Any life is better than death, at least I can hear Boulderfall and feel his presence. And Skypool said that it wasn't impossible for my sight to come back some day. "Do you want to go for a walk?" Scorch jumped at the voice by her side, she hadn't even noticed the cat's approach.

She stood up and turned toward Moonfrost, "Yes, but you'll have to guide me," she mewed, feeling awkward about her dependance. But Moonfrost quietly slipped her tail around her neck and led her slowly to the entrance.

"Wing and the others left today?" Moonfrost mewed.

Scorch nodded, "They left a little while ago, Wing said good bye to me," she mewed, stepping carefully through the grass, unsure of what lay ahead.

"There's a log just ahead, we'll go around it," Moonfrost mewed calmly, pulling her sidewise and through ferns, their soft leaves tickling her sides. "I don't think any cat was sad to see them go," the she-cat mewed.

"They did help free the Clans," Scorch defended.

"I didn't say the opposite. But they clearly didn't want to be here, every cat will be happier this way," Moonfrost mewed, pausing to nudge something out of the path.

"I guess," Scorch sighed, stumbling over a hole in the ground. She let out an irritable hiss as her claw got caught and she yanked it painfully out, "I hate being blind!"

I don't imagine that it is fun," Moonfrost commented coolly, "But you can't pick and choose your battle-scars, you have to learn to live with them. Yet, you don't need to feel like you have to do this alone, the Clan and every cat in it is here for you to lean on as you learn how to live with this. You don't have to isolate yourself in the elder's den."

"I wasn't the one who chose to move there! Sunstorm did," Scorch scowled. "And I feel so useless, what can I possibly do to help the Clan? I can't hunt, can't fight, I couldn't heal cats, I can hardly stay on my own paws!"

"You'll learn and be more sure pawed in time. Right now, the only thing you have to do is recover, and then I'm sure some cat can find you something to keep you busy," Moonfrost mewed.

Scorch muttered under her breath but didn't say anything, sitting down in the path and grumpily planting herself there. Moonfrost sighed and turned back toward the camp, "If you make it back on your own, great. If not, I'll be back later. You're within shouting

distance of the Clan from here so don't hesitate to make a racket if you're in trouble," the she-cat mewed, her voice and pawsteps ebbing along the path they had just come along, going much faster than before.

I knew it, I'll just slow every cat down. Getting to her paws again she shook the dew off her fur and hesitantly started walking forward, moving one pawstep at a time as she gathered in what the terrain was and clumsily avoiding obstacles that she bumped into.

She hissed as something gripped her leg and pulled her to the ground. Getting to her paws she found that the more she pulled, the tighter the grip on her paw became. *Where did this blasted vine come from?!* Using her teeth, she tried to bite it off, but it was too thick. *Now what?*

"Scorch! Scorch! Scorch?!" Scorch flattened her ears at Boulderfall's calls, she didn't want him to see her like this, trapped by a stupid plant! Almost desperately she yanked with her paw, hoping it would break, but it only constricted around her paw even more.

"Here you are!" Boulderfall's mew was cheerful as he trotted up to her, his paws pattering across the ground toward her. "You've got your paw all wrapped up in the ivy," he mewed, stopping beside her.

"Thanks, I hadn't noticed," Scorch growled, glaring in his direction.

"Even though you can't see, your eyes are still so intense," Boulderfall mewed.

Scorch sighed and rolled he eyes, her paw was aching from the grip the ivy had, "You can help any time now."

Boulderfall's purr rumbled and she felt his claws working on untangling the ivy vine from her paw and in a minute she was free, testing her paw to see how it felt. "Is your paw okay?" the tom asked. Scorch nodded and slumped her shoulders as she let out a sigh. "What's wrong?" he asked as she started back along the path to camp.

"Everything. I can't see a thing! All the things I wanted have been stolen from me. My own future is bleak and dark," she complained.

"It will be if you keep up that attitude, you need to be more happy," he purred again, walking with a bounce in his step at her side.

Scorch bumped into him friendlily, "Well I can tell that you're bursting with happiness, think you can spare a bit?"

"The dawn patrol met the WindClan dawn patrol and told us that Willowleaf had visited the Moonpool and that StarClan has appointed a leader for them!" Boulderfall mewed excitedly.

"Who is it?" Scorch asked.

"Cavepath! Not that surprising, he had been leading WindClan for a while. He's Cavestar now and he appointed Frostshine as his deputy. But do you know what this means?" Bouderfall mewed, she could feel he was bursting with excitement.

"WindClan has leadership?" Scorch guessed.

"No! Well, yes, but that's not what I was talking about. It means that StarClan will appoint someone in ThunderClan to be leader! If they did it for WindClan, then they'll do it for us, I'm sure. Skypool already left for the Moonpool," Boulderfall chattered, he wasn't really talking to her, he was so excited he needed some cat to share it with and Scorch was happy to be that cat.

"Did you know that Wing and the others left?" he mewed suddenly.

Scorch nodded, "I was there when they left. I guess Clan life isn't for every cat." *It certainly isn't for me, but now I'm stuck with it.*

"Rogues don't belong in the Clans," Boulderfall declared.

Scorch nudged him sharply, "If it weren't for all those rogues, every Clan cat would still be under the control of Nightwing and Pinefur," she retorted.

"If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have been enslaved to begin with," Boulderfall mewed pointedly.

"If Clan cats are so much better, why couldn't they handle a paw-full of rogues without our help then?" Scorch shot back.

Boulderfall was silent as they padded slowly along the path. "I'll admit," he growled, "That those rogues were strong and they did show some good characteristics helping us out. And it is okay that some of them chose to stay with us. But there is a difference between the Clan life and rogue life. If we were to allow just any cat to join, then it would no longer be a warrior's life we led, but a warrior-like rogue life. These two lives have to remain separate, that is how we preserve ourselves."

"But is it fair to separate the cats as well? Shun any cat not exactly like you? Heck, you shun any cat not in your own Clan. Can you condemn a cat just because they live and think differently then you?" Scorch asked, what did he really think about her origins?

Boulderfall was silent again for a moment as he thought. "I think you can, after all, the rogues who chose the warrior life we welcomed. But I don't think it is possible for us to live that closely without conflict. We choose to live differently for a reason; a warrior that chooses to live like a rogue is a rogue, and a rogue that chooses to live like a warrior is a warrior, in the honorary sense anyways."

Scorch sighed, "You Clan cats make things too complicated."

Boulderfall nudged her, "You're a Clan cat too now."

"I never said I didn't make things complicated, but I want to be alone for a while. You go back to camp without me," Scorch mewed. The path was half familiar, not much further was the entrance, she could scent all the cats and even a faint hum of mews sounded through the trees.

"Alright, if you're sure," Boulderfall mewed, sounding a little sad and hesitant. But he continued on and Scorch sat down just off the trail in a patch of flowers.

"I know you're here, Time," Scorch mewed aloud. She had sensed his presence and even though she could no longer see him, she

could imagine his shifting black pelt and glowing red eyes.

"Even without your eyesight you're still sharp," Time mewed, his voice coming from all around her.

"I wouldn't agree with that. But why are you here? You didn't visit me before when I searched for you," she mewed reproachfully. This was the first time she'd met him since the battle and she had called and longed to talk with him.

"I came here," Time's voice was hard, "To forbid you from using your future powers again."

"Why?" Scorch asked quietly. She didn't care, in fact, she was a bit relived to have an excuse not to search the future

"Do you know why you're blind?" Time asked instead.

"Because Pinefur practically clawed my eyes out?" Scorch mewed.

"Yes, but why would a dying, vengeful cat at your paws reach up and scratch your eyes instead of your throat?" Scorch was silent, what was Time playing at?

"He did it because he was, for the moment, being controlled. It was your punishment for changing the future. This is the fate you chose for yourself. And I warn you that if you see the future and change it again, it will kill you," Time growled.

Scorch was stunned. This was a punishment? From whom? Who had the right to blind her for saving her friend's life? "Time is not a thing to be tampered with," the ancient being growled, "When you attacked Pinefur to change the future, did everything stop? Time was in a flux since you had power over past and future so also for a brief moment did you have power over the present. But since you changed the future, your present was changed. That is why the foresight of the future is so much more dangerous."

Scorch remained silent and brooding for a second until she thought of something, "Did Sonya ever change the future?" Was it just a coincidence that the holder of the future had died of some strangely triggered illness at such a young age?

"She did," Time mewed and Scorch felt her belly lurch. "The first time she changed the future was to save her family. Her punishment was being exiled by them. The second was in service of you, she killed Nightwing when Sunstar should have been the one to die in that fight. She froze time there as well since while you were trapped in time, she had power over the past."

Scorch swallowed hard, so she was responsible for another of her friends' death. If only she'd never been born, how many cats would have lived full and happy lives? *All I do is bring death, and now that's all I can do.* " I won't look into the future again," Scorch swore, "I don't want to ever use my powers again, I don't even want to live."

Leaving, Scorch stumbled, bumped, and fell her way through the forest. It was slow going and the sun rose, the heat of the day making her feel clammy and uncomfortable. Eventually she stood on what she supposed was the top of some ridge, her front paw half dangling off a cliff. The stream that ran along the WindClan border rushed below, flowing down to the lake and she could hear it rushing wildly. *It would be so easy to disappear. When you're dead, you don't have any worries.*

But do you have regrets? Things you want to do in the future? Things you want to experience? And what about those around you, how hurt would they be to know that she'd given up so easily? This wasn't like her and just because she didn't feel like herself, that didn't mean she had to give up everything.

"Things won't go back to the way they used to be. You need to quit chasing clouds and find something real to grasp and hold in your life. What is most important to you? Picture it. Grasp it."

Scorch closed her eyes- though it made no difference- and an image appeared. Gray and fuzzy, blue eyes sparkling and smooth fur gleaming in the sun. She sighed, feeling calm flow over her anger, guilt, and fear. How could she forget in the face of her worries what was most important to her? Her friends were trying to help her, but she hadn't let them help. And one in particular caught her breath, the one she'd accepted this fate for.

Purring and brighter than she had been in days, she stumbled and

made her way back toward camp. Scorch paused as pawsteps approached her rapidly, she tasted the air but before she could some cat exploded into her. She screeched but before she pulled out her claws she recognized the warm scent. "Boulderfall!" she cried when they stopped rolling. She was on her back and he stood over her, his front paws planted on either side of her head. "I'm supposed to be the blind one!"

Boulderfall chuckled apologetically. "Scorch, I was looking for you," he mewed.

"So was I!" Scorch purred.

"I wanted to ask you something," he started, she sensed nervousness like a coat of itchy dry grass encircling him. "Do you think," he broke off again, "That I'd make a good leader?" he finished awkwardly.

Scorch nearly purred. He was cute when he was shy, it was so unlike him. But she knew he wouldn't be the one to ask the question that she was sure had been on his mind for awhile. Leaning upward, she nuzzled his neck, "I bet you would be. And if you do become leader-" she paused, images flashing in front of her eyes.

Unlike last time, they weren't bloody and terribly, but now they were grand and majestic. She had broken Time's orders and seen the future again, yet this time she had no reason to want to change a thing. "When you become leader," she whispered to Boulderfall, "I want to be the one beside you."

"You really can read my mind sometimes," Boulderfall whispered in her ear. "You sure you want to be my mate?"

"I can't think of any cat else I'd want to love, and there's not another cat I can't live without. But I don't want to be a burden, I want to be your companion that supports you, and all I want is your support in return," Scorch mewed.

"I think I can do that," Boulderfall mewed.

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The rest of that day they spent together, playing by the lake and rolling in the flower patches. Boulderfall didn't even bother telling the Clan where they were and decided that since it was the rich season of green-leaf, they could eat what they caught without contributing to the Clan just this once. They spent the night sleeping on the lake shore, Boulderfall counting the stars for her as she listened to the rhythm of the waves until they fell asleep, a heap of gray and black and red on the warm and moon bleached sand.

The next day dawned a lovely pale red sky tinted with gold and surrounded by a faint blue halo. That was how Boulderfall described it to Scorch, becoming her eyes that she saw through. "We work pretty well together," Boulderfall mewed, guiding her through the forest toward the camp.

Scorch was pressed to his side, her smaller form disappearing in his gray fur. "Had you forgotten? We did so many crazy things together before. We saved all four Clans together, remember?"

Boulderfall laughed and briefly touched the top of her head with his muzzle, "I do recall something like that happening."

"Do you think Skypool is back yet?" Scorch asked, stepping over a rabbit hole that Boulderfall pointed out.

"Probably, I wonder who the leader will be," Boulderfall mewed, excitement bubbling up in his voice again.

"Power really does excite you, doesn't it?" Scorch teased, flicking him with her tail.

Boulderfall coughed, "I don't think it's the power so much as the leadership and responsibility. It sounds hard, but I think it's invigorating."

She rolled her blind eyes, "You're so weird. But I guess I'd rather a leader who wanted the job than one who didn't," Scorch mused.

"Precisely," Boulderfall purred, flicking his tail over her ears before he laid it over her shoulders again. "The camp is just up ahead."

"It sounds buzzing already. I bet Skypool is back," Scorch mewed, sensing the waves of excitement rolling out toward them. She smiled, already knowing who the leader would be. Perhaps knowing the future was more trouble than it was worth, but right now, the sweet taste of anticipation was reward enough.

"Boulderfall! Boulderfall!" the moment the two stepped into camp, a mass of cats greeted them, cheering in complete ecstasy.

Scorch already knew what was going on and it took only a few bewildered moments for Boulderfall to realize what was going on as well and he shouted out, "I'm going to be leader of ThunderClan!" Scorch purred, she could picture his eyes glowing with life and love as he gazed at her; one image she would never lose.

You were right, Sonya. I shouldn't worry about chasing clouds, but loving the flowers down below.

Epilouge

Epilogue

The soft mewling of kits filled the tranquil coolness of evening. The delicate warmth of new-leaf drifted on the blossom-scented breeze, the haunting scent of night imposing on the young forest as the flower petals closed up and the critters scampered to their nests.

But the night was alive as well. The sharp-eyed owl swopped from its nest and the slumbering badger rose from its underground den, both intent on finding some grub before morning. Fox and moles moved about the forest as they pleased and the erect figures of cats slipped through the silhouetted greenery, their eyes glowing unearthly with the dying light.

The leader of the cats was a large stone gray tom. His blue eyes were weathered into a sharp gaze, yet they still pooled softly with life and love. His followers filed silently after him into a stone hollow, the afterglow of dusk being taken over by the dark blue sky.

The soft scent of milk attracted the tom's attention to a dark bramble thicket woven into the roots of a fallen tree so ancient that its pale bark was stripped smooth and glowed pale in the light. The tom turned to his cats and dismissed them with a commanding flick of his tail before he padded silently to the den where the scent of milk and pitiful mewling arose from.

Stepping carefully through the entrance that scratched at his shoulders he blinked to allow his eyes adjust before proceeding to the edge of a large moss nest. A red furred she-cat with black patches was curled in the feathery green, her eyes closed in dozing. Her long, unruly fur created a stark contrast against the natural green of her moss nest, but blended with the shadows of dusk.

The tom took a moment to admire her long, slender body and her well muscled legs and shoulders. He looked at the end of her fluffy tail and used a paw to sweep it aside, staring at the two tiny forms

curled at the queen's belly. *They're so perfect.*

One of the kits was a stolid gray tom, much like himself, but had an odd black ear and foot- marks that came from the kitten's mother. The she-kit was a little smaller than her brother, her fur a smoky blue gray- like that of an approaching rainstorm or of the sky approaching midnight in the height of greeneaf. The tom tilted his head, he still thought she looked a little odd. Her head was rounder than her well-shaped Clanmates and her paws were already disproportionally round to her tiny body.

"Aren't they wonderful, Boulderstar?" The tom turned to look at his mate, Scorch. Her vibrant dark gaze stared down at the kits and he felt- as he often did- a wave of sorrow. Scorch- many, many moons ago- had been blinded in a decisive battle for the Clans.

He always felt guilty, for the injury had occurred while she was saving his life. But there was no sorrow in her gaze as she stared down at the kits she'd never see. "We still haven't given them names," he murmured, looking back at the kits and sitting down so that his flank brushed his mate's.

"They're only two days old. There's time yet to find the perfect names," Scorch mewed softly.

"Do you have any names in mind?" Boulderstar asked, he had a few names, but it was Scorch who had carried and given birth to these kits, he didn't want to intrude if she had names picked out.

Scorch hesitated and then nodded, touching the tom kit gently, "I would like to name him Rainkit, after my mother."

Boulderstar nodded, he had never met Scorch's parents, but he knew how deeply it had hurt her after she was blinded, to know that her dream of one day finding them would remain just that. Over the moons he had gone to great lengths to try to help, even leading a patrol to try to find them and bring them back to see Scorch. But days upon days he had spent along the sandy shore, the terrifying ocean to one side and empty land to the other.

"And for the she-kit?" he asked.

"Jaykit," Scorch mewed firmly. She offered no explanation but her eyes were fixed upon the kit as if she could see it. Her eyes were brimmed with emotion as she stared, as if in a trance. But like looking into a dark pool, he couldn't see what was there.

"Why Jaykit?" Boulderstar asked, he could find a much more dainty name for his daughter.

"Her eyes will be darker than than the darkest jay's wing," Scorch said matter-of-factly, nuzzling her kits until they mewled, disturbed from their noisy sleep.

Boulderstar looked at Scorch, "How could you know what her eyes will look like? They haven't even opened, and it will take a moon for them to come to their true color."

"They will be blue," Scorch insisted. "They'll be so dark they look black, just like my mother's."

Boulderstar smiled at his mate, he had long since learned that she knew things she shouldn't. "I'll tell the Clan their names tomorrow, for tonight let's sleep," he mewed, curling around his family so that their warmth was shared.

He purred, pleased and content with his lovely family. "Look, they're sleeping together," a loud whisper interrupted his dozing. He didn't stir, but Scorch's whiskers twitched, her eyes staying closed.

"Shh! Stupid, you'll wake them up!" another voice hissed at the first one and a third voice giggled.

The churlish giggle woke the kits and their voices rose in tiny mewls of complaint that rivaled any nest of baby birds. Boulderstar sighed, having easily recognized the voices, and raised his head the look at the trio of intruders upon this peaceful scene. "Smokepaw, Stonepaw, Emberpaw," Boulderstar growled in a low voice, warning them to be quiet.

"You may as well come in, they're already awake," Scorch sighed, sitting up again and nudging the awoken kits to her belly so that they could nurse.

The three apprentices came in, bumping into each other as they each tried to be the first one in. *They were so much more careful the first time they came in, why can't they always be like that?* Finally the three littermates stood quietly over the nest, cooing and purring at the sight of their new brother and sister.

Boulderstar shook his head, his first litter was already nearing their warrior ceremony, he felt old just thinking about it. Smokepaw- a dark gray tom with stony blue eyes who was prodding the kits incessantly until they turned from their meal to protest at him- was the inquisitive one of the three. Always poking his nose here and there, his father was sure he got it from his mother, along with his habit of finding trouble.

Stonepaw was a lanky pale gray tom with yellow eyes, he was the serious and loyal one- Scorch didn't hardly go a day without telling him how much alike Stonepaw was to him. And Emberpaw was the last one, an odd duck one could say- her bright red fur was molted with brown patches and her green eyes were the shade of new grass. Both her looks and personality stood out the most from her brothers, for although most of the time she acted like an air-head, giggling and laughing at nonsense, when it came to hunting and fighting there were none more focused.

Boulderstar purred as the three older siblings nudged and petted the new arrivals. He met Scorch's gaze, she stared at him, pleasure and joy wrapped up in one as they sat with their family. Perhaps life hadn't turned out the way they'd thought it would, but Boulderstar couldn't think of anything more he could want. He knew Scorch felt the same, but he didn't see the dark shadow flicker over her gaze as she stared down at her new kits. He knew she could see the past, he didn't know she could see the future.

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The mountains are quiet; they are placid; they are immoveable; they are trustworthy. Perhaps that is why the creatures that live on top of these stark peaks stubbornly live in such a contrasting manner. The wild eagles, the jumpy mountain sheep and goats, elusive reptiles, and dangerous cats.

The sky above the mountains has the same sense. It is ever changing to make up for the surface that does nothing but stand tall and gray over the the green foothills. One more thing that the creatures and sky have in common in the mountains- they love creating storms.

It starts with whispers, in deserted caves and small gatherings, a thought- just an idea- that could change the world around them. So the air starts moving, a light breeze, nothing more than enough to shake the leaves on the tall aspen and make some harmless noise.

Those whispers turn into rumors, running incredibly fast over the stone peaks and hidden valleys until every cat- young and old- has heard of it. And the breeze picks up, becoming a formidable wind, but staying mostly above the ground, hurrying the clouds along and bunching them together in large, compact balls of fluff.

Those rumors become reality, some cat taking lead and acquiring power in the form of gathering strong like-minded cats around himself. The clouds begin accumulating, whirling and whipping until a massive cloud has been built up, ready to start raining but holding its strength for a real storm while giving the creatures below a tremor of apprehension for the might that cannot be stopped.

That small force begins moving, increasing strength at the expense of lesser cats. Moving ever forward to their goal; an impending force. The clouds too, begin moving, slowly approaching their target and on the way enveloping smaller clouds into its mass, becoming larger and larger.

Finally the force of cats reaches an acceptable size, as judged by the leader, and they swiftly move into position, staring straight in the face of their chosen adversary waiting in tension for the opportune time to strike with fear and chaos. And the clouds have grown to a violent size and hang overhead, waiting and watching to release their full fury upon the mountains, raging against its stalwart strength and stubborn gray.

Will the storms rage for long? Or is it all simply a huge bluff? Will the land be left with nothing more than a refreshing shower with

the leaves dripping and glimmering when the sun reappears, or will the light show a ravaged land with only the stone left recognizable? Likewise, will the cats leave with nothing changed, or will there be scars that last a lifetime? All one can do is wait the storm out and see for themselves.